'Minor Traditions' of Dissent: Comparative Study of the Matuas and the Bauls 2000-2019

Thesis Submitted In Partial Fulfilment For The Award Of The Degree Of Doctor Of Philosophy

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2023

Certified that the Thesis Entitled

'Minor Traditions' of Dissent: Comparative Study of the Matuas and the Bauls 2000-2019 submitted by me for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of Prof. Partha Pratim Basu.

And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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DEDICATED TO MY PARENTS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank my parents. Their blessings and love are the most valuable treasures that a son can have. I have been unfortunate enough to lose my father before the completion of this work. I can't thank him enough. My mother, like all mothers, is my shelter, my teacher and my guiding light. My pranam to both of them.

I humbly thank God. In strength and in weakness, in resolve and in vacillation, I have asked and I have received.

I would like to express by gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Partha Pratim Basu for his valuable insights and guidance. It is my privilege to work under him and his expertise in the field was of immense help during the course of my research.

This arduous and enlightening journey would not have been accomplished without the love, support and encouragement from Prof. Imankalyan Lahiri, Head, Department of International Relations. I express by sincere gratitude to him.

All the faculty members of the Department of International Relations have been extremely supportive and encouraging. I can't thank them enough for their support and motivation.

I sincerely thank my colleagues at Krishnagar Government College Dr. Ashraful Islam Laskar, Mr. Abinash Darnal and Manojit Mondal for their moral support. I also extend by sincere gratitude to my Officer-in-Charge of Krishnagar Government College Dr. Sobhan Niyogi for his cooperation and encouragement.

I am immensely thankful to Sri Kamal Mondal and Sri Aishik Bag for their help during my field work. From accompanying me to field visits in sensitive areas to making many of crucial interviews possible; their support, cooperation and local knowledge have helped me immensely in successfully completing my field work.

My heartfelt gratitude to all those who actively participated in my field research. Their insights, experience and cooperation nourished me as a researcher and made my task an enlightening and enjoyable experience.

I thank the Jadavpur University Library, Jawaharlal Nehru University library, Ramakrishna Mission Library, National Library, Kolkata for providing me valuable resources without which my research would not have been possible.

I thank the Sri Partha Pratim Bose, Librarian, Department of International Relations for his assistance and encouragements.

I thank all the Department office staff and the staff of PhD Cell who have always been helpful.

I thank the staffs of the Copy Centre, Jadavpur, for printing and binding my thesis within the stipulated time.

I thank my sister Smt. Indratapa Putatunda, my dearest little niece Shalmali and my friends Suman and Aishik for making my journey as a researcher a joyous experience. I also thank my parents-in-law for their active support and encouragement. A special note of thanks for my sister-in-law, Dr. Rahi Das for playing the part of trusted family physician during the years of research.

Finally, I must thank my lovely wife Urbi Das who has been untiringly by my side through the difficult phases of my research when I might have lost confidence and given up on the project altogether. It is her constant encouragement, support and active assistance in locating sources, proof-reading and a hundred other tasks which have made this thesis possible.

Last of all, I owe full responsibility for any errors in my thesis.

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PREFACE

Statement of the Problem

The word dissent, derived from the Latin 'dissentere' can mean 'differing in sentiment' as well as 'withholding assent'. The concept of dissent therefore includes an element of non-conformity to as established power structure. Since, power in society or a state is institutionalized by the political, social and religious organizations, therefore, dissenting against an organized, 'mainstream' religion is an important exercise in manifesting the agency of the oppressed.

In the European and American contexts, religious dissent took the form of establishment of millenarian sects such as the Seventh Day Adventists, the Mormons etc. in the Indian context too, religious dissent since the middle ages usually took the form of non-conforming sects who eventually managed to attract such a large congregation and develop such internal rules regarding the crucial aspects of inter-marriage and commensality that they eventually transformed into castes of their own and came to be accepted as a part of the dominant religions and social structure. The Lingayats and the Gaudiya Vaishnavas both are examples of such sects. However, it can be observed that when the caste identity of a dissenting sect is that of an untouchable or associated with Jati-based professions which were once considered as derogatory or unclean; such sects despite their success, remain an oppositional force to the established religion and can never be truly integrated.

This research works presents the Matua and the Bauls as two sects of such lower caste people with linguistic and cultural commonalities and traces both their roots to Sahajiya Vaishnavism. The study first attempts to uncover the dissenting spirit of the Sahajiya Vaishnavas and their opposition against Gaudiya Vaishnavism. It also addresses the issue of Sufi influence on development of the Baul sect and discusses how opposition against orthodox Islam forms the second layer of dissent in Baul theology and practices.

Despite the Matua and the Baul both being dissenting groups with a similar beginning; the outcome of their efforts appears to be very different. As members of their respective little

traditions, success is measured in terms of maintaining their identity. However, since in the context of India, little traditions are inextricably linked with the question of caste, success is also measured in terms of their ability to challenge the system and either dismantling the structure or using it in their favour. The Matuas, by staying united and pressing their numerical advantage have been far ahead of the Bauls in terms of social, economic and political ascendency. Bauls, on the other hand, by transforming into a symbol of idealized rural simplicity and secularism, have become the favourite cultural object for the urban Bengali. Misinterpretation of the message for the unity of the lower strata of both Hindu and Muslim society against oppression by leaders of both religions as a call for nineteenth century concept of secularism caused the Bauls to be the symbol of Bengal's religious toleration and helped to advance the narrative of Bengal's exclusivity in terms of identity-based politics.

The Baul and Matua have frequently been called folk religions of Bengal and have featured in various edited works focusing on folk religions. The study argues that both these traditions have not showed the same spirit for aloofness and creation of a separate, non-conformist cosmology as a folk religion is expected to. Bauls have progressed far in this path, to the extent that a complete amalgamation of the Sufi and Bhakti concepts have taken place along with a fusion between the Prophet Muhammad and a very Bhakti oriented interpretation of Krishna-Radha. A majority of the 'Baul Samaj' comprise of individuals as well as families which left the orthodoxy of Islam without relinquishing all the ritual ties. For example, almost no Baul observes the obligation of praying five times but they do celebrate festivals like Eid and routinely invoke Allah and Rasul in their prayers and songs. The songs don't only present the baul worldview and illustrate his ideal way of life and his preferred mode of communication to God but they also hide a transcript of opposition to the dominant religious groups.

Both sects espouse an egalitarian version of religion and society with importance placed on the role of women. Both sects emphasize the need to communicate with fellow members through means of songs and poetry. Both shun the role of priests from any established religion in matters of worship or social events such as marriage or funeral.

The research, in view of these problems, attempts to bridge a conceptual gap in determining how these two minor traditions of dissent operate within a contemporary timeline and what explains their very different position today in terms of their relationship with the dominant religions and the caste structure.

Research Questions:

1. Which factors are responsible for the rise of the Baul as an oppositional sect of the excluded within the framework of Gaudiya Vashnavism?
2. How did the Bauls transformed their dissent into acceptable cultural expressions of Bhakti-oriented and Sufi influenced religiosity?
3. How did the untouchable Namashudras emerge as Matua, a dissenting sect both within and without Vaishnavism?
4. Why do the Baul and the Matua sects differ so significantly in their reaction to the hegemonic advances of dominant monolithic religions?

Methodology:

This research, being a study of two religious and social groups and their modes of dissent from political and religious authority, is essentially qualitative in nature. A flexible approach was undertaken during the fieldwork. However, a few quantitative methods were also used during the process. For example, a cross-sectional study was undertaken where the study population was decided to be the residents of three villages bordering Bangladesh in the Bongaon subdivision of Nadia district. These villages were selected as there is a significant Matua population residing in these villages, many of which has migrated after 1971. Therefore, the question of citizenship, a key component of the questionnaire was put forward to them, with provision for anonymity of the respondents. Thereby, these villages had more chance of yielding rich data than other locations in the same area. A framework was prepared to analyze the responses, with help of spreadsheet software, assigning codes for both closed and open-ended questions in the questionnaire. For close ended questions, such as profession, age, marital status, whether migrated before or after 1971, whether

regularly participate in Matua religious programs (Matam) or not etc. Codes were assigned to measure and connect results based on predetermined parameters such as frequency of occurrence and willingness/unwillingness to answer specific questions. All close ended questions were either simple yes/no questions or clear multiple-choice questions. For example, for the question 'how frequently do you attend a Matua religious gathering', the options were, once a year or less, two to five times a year, more than five times a year. But the study design more commonly used was one-one-one interviews, group interviews and non-participant observation. It is to be mentioned that group interviews were of two types. In the first type, undertaken under a more informal setting such as a village tea shop or the sitting area of a temple, average participants were engaged with full disclosure of the researcher's purpose. These interviews were more freewheeling and veered more towards gathering a sense of a common sentiment on an issue like the dominant Matua Thakur family's involvement in politics. The second type of group interviews were undertaken during a festival or a special occasion when many Matua gurus, gosai or community leaders were present.

An attempt was made to incorporate local Vaishnav and Muslim educated and influential participants in these groups where the discussion, more structured than the one described above, was geared to develop an understanding of the connections between the Namasudra Matuas and the other locally dominant but non-elite members of society. One on one interviews always involved specifically chosen special respondents who are knowledgeable leaders of their communities. It has been the most common type of design used by me to gather data regarding Bauls since it has been my experience that it is extremely difficult to gather meaningful information from people claiming to be Bauls or Fakirs who are too professional to engage in a general discussion regarding their beliefs or practices in front of a researcher. Another problem which led to the use on one on one interview being the primary method used by the researcher for Bauls is the realization that most respondents professing to be Bauls actually were mere performers of folk songs and knew nothing about the beliefs or secretive practices of a Baul sadhak. That realization however, was in itself, a source of interesting observations as the number of such Bauls and their percentage among sizable samples selected during festivals such as the Sati Ma mela in Ghosh Para Kalyani

and Agradwip mela in Agradwip, Bardhhaman indicates in an empirical manner, to the present status of the Bauls.

Secondary data was also extremely important for the research and both vernacular and English sources were pursued. A good number of sources available on the Matuas were collected as a result of fieldwork. It revealed a world of sectarian vernacular publications, in book, journal and newspaper formats which otherwise would not have been accessible. Perusal of these resources also revealed the identities of Matua intellectuals who, may not always be formally educated but possesses impressive knowledge on Maua literature and religious views.

Throughout the research, non-participant observation remained the most important tool of the research. The inability of the researcher to perform participant observation due to the barriers of caste and social position bars this research work from being considered an ethnography. Reflective Journal Logs were kept throughout the primary research process in order to organize the thoughts and findings of the researcher.

The study is divided into the following chapters:

1. **The Many Facets of Sectarian Dissent: Locating the Baul and the Matua**

This chapter will introduce the two groups of Baul and Matua, explain the basics characteristics and attempt to project this study from a broad viewpoint of Sociology of Religion. As is necessitated by this approach, the chapter will delve into the conceptual questions of the relationship between religion and social and political structures. the problematic of the difference between the political and social achievements of the two sects emerging out of a similar predicament of resisting major religious beliefs. This chapter will geographically place the two sects and will introduce the reader with basic tenets of the two sects. This chapter will also elucidate the methodology used in the entire work and attempt to familiarize the reader with the unique social settings of the somewhat detached settlements of the Baul and Matua and introduce the characters necessary for participant observation.

2. The Journey from Vaishnava to Sahajiya: The Spiritual Trajectory of the Baul

This chapter shall introduce the reader with the concepts essential to the Baul identity and religious life and attempt to chart the emergence of Bauls as a group of religious dissenters arising out of post-Chaitanya Vaishnavism. The chapter focusses particularly on the caste identity of the Bauls and argues that it was their caste identity, rather than their heretical and profane practices which resulted in their virtual exclusion from the Vaishnava fold. The chapter presents literary evidence of the existence of Sahajiya currents of thought in ancient Indian religious thinking and discusses Tantra, Nath Pantha and Tantric Buddhism to establish this claim. Finally, the chapter presents the fascinating secret practices of the Baul Sadhana as a rebellion against the established order using the body as a site for rebellion.

3. The Matuas of Bengal: Their Origin, Beliefs and Social Position

This chapter describes the beginning of the Matua sect and focuses on the life and teachings of the two founders of the sect, namely, Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur. It pays particular attention to the role of education among the Matua and the early realization of the founders that state power was the way to uplift their people. History of the Matuas present a fascinating insight into the ways an untouchable sect identifies their immediate oppositional forces and navigates the treacherous path of national movement and nation-building championed by the upper castes. The chapter will pay particular emphasis on the effect of financial self-sufficiency of the Matuas and the total absence of their Jati related restraints on profession. It will further deal with the question of their identity and discuss the relevance of the concepts of caste, sect, cult and sampradaya in relation to this. Further, the chapter will deal with the revisionist effect of Ambedkarite Buddhism among a section of the Matuas and whether this has affected the common Matua follower. Finally, the chapter will shed light on the secret rituals and practices not commonly acknowledged within the Matuas which links them more closely with the Bauls as a dissenting sect.

4. Transformation of Baul and Matua Identity in Contemporary Bengal: Immersion and Consolidation of Identity

This penultimate chapter deals with the findings of the primary research as well as reflects on the contemporary observations made in secondary sources regarding the present status of the Bauls and the Matuas in Bengali society and politics. It presents the somewhat disappointing finding that Bauls, at least in the geographical area under study, have almost completely lost their identity as a dissenting religious sect as far as Hindu Bauls are concerned. They have turned into professional performers who only maintain a façade of esotericism and detachment which is a conscious performance for their urban and foreign audience who already have that image of a Baul in their minds. The chapter shows the clear differences existing between Hindu Bauls and Muslim fakirs in the region and explains the difference with the Baul scene in Rarh Bengal. Furthermore, the chapter delves into an understanding of the world of the Muslim Fakir in whom the characteristics of dissent is still very much alive. The chapter narrates the incidents of continuous religious persecution felt by the Muslim fakirs, the replication of caste structure among the rural Bengali Muslim society and its implication for the Fakirs and their forced displacement and loss of identity in the face of an apathetic state and civil society. Moving on to the second part, the chapter presents the findings of primary research work on Matuas and analyses the importance of the sect identity, religious affiliation and opinions of the common Matua as well as presenting their view regarding political decisions taken by the leaders of the community. The chapter also attempts to test whether the Matuas have transcended from a dissenting sect to the political assertive Dalit identity.

5. Conclusion

The final chapter deals mostly with the present and attempts to present a rationale for the changing perception regarding the importance of the Matua as a political force among the political parties of Bengal. The chapter also shows the limitation of a pan-Indian Dalit political consciousness among the Matuas and the separation of their religion and politics in their eyes. It will further show evidence of a return of identity politics in Bengal primarily due to the political success of the Matuas. At the same time, the chapter will focus on the utter of loss of identity,

commercialization and lack of cohesion the Bauls and point to the factors responsible for the decline of their identity as a dissenting religious sect.

Chapter One

The Many Facets of Sectarian Dissent: Locating the Baul and the Matua

Introduction:

Social organizations are social products. They arise out of necessities of human interactions and from outcomes of human experiences. Every individual and every collective aspire to live a life which is close to the ideal of that particular time and society. This ideal is again, shaped and reshaped by the lived experiences of man in society. The transformative aspect of experiences which applies to a collective or a whole is what keeps the society dynamic. Social organizations are often the vehicles for that dynamism and transformation which keep a society competitive and alive. Religion being the greatest of social organizations, plays a crucial part in shaping social norms and mores which give structure to social life. Power, that is distinct from brute force, is also channelised through such structures. Because of this interplay between power and social structures, religion and religious institutions have been primary sites for wielding power. Power, however, automatically creates a division. In order for state power to flow and social systems to persist, there must be a centre from where power emanates and receptors, understood as 'commoners' or passive recipients of instructions, to where this power is channelized. In a social organization as large and important as a major religion, power originates from political, economic and traditional, or ritualistic sources. In religion, the dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion is more acute than other social systems because the parochiality of the traditional knowledge systems that usually informs the ideological core of a religion, are quite resistant to change. Therefore, the excluded majority, i.e., those who do not get a stake in fashioning the nature and expressions of power, attempt to create their own organizations within or outside the ambit of the major religions. The very creation of a sect or a cult within a religion point to the existence of heterogenous opinions. Such opinions from groups, which have historically been ostracized, can take the form of large-scale protest movements as well. The study of two such groups, the Matua and the Baul, which has been taken up in this research, attempts to understand and demonstrate this very process of expressing dissent. Since these groups belong to the Indian society and express their dissent against religions which are also, essentially Indian or Indianized in nature, the particular experiences of these groups have to be analysed in order to better understand the motivations behind their acts of dissent. As

the Baul and the Matua originated in different periods of Indian history with the former originating during the pre-colonial Muslim rule and the latter after the establishment of British colonial rule, their experiences as excluded and dissenting groups are also fundamentally different. However, this research is aimed at founding the commonalities which connects these two groups, which, despite their different origins, have a lot in common. In order to pursue a detailed study of these groups, an exposition of the conceptual tools, such as caste, sect and cult, which will be utilised during the research, has been undertaken. While reading the subsequent portions, it is important to remember the semantic limitations posed by the English language which is removed from the ethos of the society and the time which it is addressing. Therefore, the opening section shall involve a discussion on the meanings engendered in categories like cult or sect by their western association, before using these categories to delineate the present topics of research.

The Problem with definitions: Cults and Sects in the Indian Context

The typical American definition of cults strangely ties them to a very short time frame in history and does not shed any light on those religious groups which bore every mark of being cults before the 1960's-70's. For example, how else should one identify the Ku-Klux-Clan or the Skull and Bones Society? These entities were off course formed with very different intentions than that of the New Religious Movements (NRM) of 1960's which wanted to explore the spiritual side of western man (Dawson 1998). Nevertheless, they all borrowed from the age-old tradition of secret societies of Europe which were established to function for a specific temporal cause. The Freemason Society for example, was established in the 14th century by stonemasons in the Europe so that a strict guild system be maintained to regulate knowledge about the art of stonemasonry. In ancient Rome and Greece, numerous such cults existed, focusing on individual gods of choice rather than the conventional worship of a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses. Thus, the cult of Mithras and the cult of Bacchus, among others, attracted significant membership. Cults have an ancient history in India as well. The Cult of the Mother Goddess has proven to be an important cult with its roots in the ancient Harappan Civilization. Numerous Shakti worshipping cults have originated from the original Mother Goddess cult (Dubey 2015). Eastern India, especially the land belonging nowadays to Bengal, Bangladesh and Assam

proved to be fertile ground for such Shakti Cults. Numerous Shaiva and Vaishnavite cults existed in this region as well. In fact, the tradition of cults in India is so ancient and their following was so huge that historians believe that the Hindu religion itself had been drastically molded by the beliefs of these ancient cults; which were eventually absorbed in the main body of Hindu religion with the help of new sacred texts, Puranas and mantras. There is reason to believe that the entire cosmology of god Bishnu, one of the three principal gods in contemporary Hinduism, is an amalgamation of the beliefs of different sects. There was an ancient Vedic Vishnu who was worshipped as a manifestation of the Sun god who was later conflated with the deities of the hero-worshipping sect of Brishni and Souraseni tribes of ancient Mathura. Their four heroes were Krishna, Sankarshana or Balaram, Pradyumna and Anirudhha. Interestingly, Madhavacharya, who was one of the principal revivalists of Vaishnavism in India after Adi Shankara established his Shaivaite order; created a cosmology of Vishnu distinct from the traditional ten avatars. He named the new class as 'Vyuhas' or supreme manifestations of Vishnu, the primordial God. These Vyuhas were named after the four Brishni heroes (Srinivasan 1979). The cult of Narayana was again, a distinct cult that existed strongly in parts of central and south eastern India, such as Kalinga. The fourth and final cult included in the fold of Vishnu worship was that of 'Gopala' or 'Balgopala' who was the favourite deity of the cow herding 'Ahir' people of the gangetic plains (Branfoot 2008). The contemporary cosmology of Vishnu includes the beliefs, practices and imageries of all these cults. However, in the Indian context, the definition and antiquity of the concept of cults and sects differ widely from the western experience. In the western world, the term cult often carries with it a pejorative connotation but it is not so in case of India. Manindra Mohan Bose in his 1930 book 'Post Chaitanya Sahajiya Cult of Bengal' refers to the 'Cult' of Sahajiya without any general hint of disapproval. Similarly, in a book published in 1988, Paritosha Dasa, professor of Banaras Hindu University, has termed both the Sahajiya of Bengal and Pancha Sakhas of Orissa as cults (Dasa 1988).

In the Indian context, these authors often use the words 'cult' and 'sect' interchangeably. As we have already seen from the western context, such nomenclature is not very problematic as sect and cult often mean the same thing there, especially in the European context. Now sect is defined in the sociology of religion as a set of beliefs followed by a

group of people where there is a clear tension between those beliefs and that of the mainstream or major religion from which that sect has sprung but broadly, the sect's teachings and ideas remain within the boundaries of the principal religion. Cults, on the other hand, may be propagating ideas which are radically different from those of the established religions. A cult may even attempt to pass itself off as the true and only acceptable version of an established religion and declare the principal religion as false! 'Sect' is another nomenclature often used interchangeably for Jati in the early Indian and European scholarship of caste. The word sect was originally used to denote the different sections of Islam such as the Sia and the Sunni, Ismaili etc. In India, the concept was first used by Bhandarkar in 1928 (McCormac, 1963) to denote the Lingayats of Mysore. Later, Basham, Weber, Srinivas etc. have all used the word interchangeably with Jati. The French anthropologist Renou gave a new idea of sect which has come to be the widely respected definition. According to him, a sect must have a few essential features, namely, that they should have a well-defined holy book or a body of scriptures, an official spiritual philosophy, some element of Bhakti in that philosophy (often expressed in terms of worshipping the founder and his associates) and an ascetic founder who is a historical figure. Lingayats fulfill all these requirements and their founder Vasava was indeed a historical figure who lived around 12th Century AD (ibid). Now, when we consider the early anthropological works on the castes of Bengal, we see that the Baul are mentioned as sect, like the Kartabhaja or the Apapanthi or the Paltudasi sects. All these sects have been included into Sahajiya Vaishnav category. Although Matua patriarch Guruchand Thakur was active during that very period of these publications and wielded considerable influence among the Namasudras of East Bengal, Matuas were not mentioned in the book by Risley (Risley 1892). This begs the question; how do we classify Baul and the Matua? Are they religious sects and if yes, can they be called Sahajiya Vaishnava sects? Can they be called a 'subaltern sect' as the Balakdasi Sampradaya of Eastern Bengal or as the Balahari sect can be termed? The Matuas pose an even harder challenge in classifying them simply as a sect as membership in the group is almost always acquired by birth, which is a hallmark of a Jati within a caste group. Although naturalized memberships exist among the Matua, such inclusions are rare and often cause friction if the new recruit originally belonged to a caste higher than the Matuas, as exemplified by the struggles of Gopal Pari, a famous Matua devotee who was born a Brahmin. However, in order to call the Matuas as members of a

particular Jati, one must then be assured about a particular caste to which this specific Jati belongs. One may assume that there is no doubt that the Matuas belong to the Shudra Varna according to the system of Varnashrama. However, a Jati does not exist independently under a Varna but as a subset of a larger caste. Here exists the difficulty. It is a historical fact that the founders of the Matua 'way', again for lack of a better term, belonged to the Namashudra Caste which was considered a 'Chandala' caste of untouchable outcasts of the Varna system (Biswas 2015). Even if the untouchables are considered as a fifth Varna and thereby it is assumed that the Namashudras are members of this hypothetical fifth Varna, it will not be possible to treat them as a Jati as Matuas don't practice strict rules of endogamy and commensality, both essential features of a Jati. In this aspect, Matuas are unique because other similar groups in India who belonged to lower castes and followed a particular Guru to form a new identity haven't managed to surpass their Jati identity despite being members of a new sect ostensibly free from the discriminatory framework of the caste system.

Paritosha Das, in his book has deciphered the rules of Sahajiya Sadhana (Das 1988). Like many other Indian methods of worship, Sahajiya Sadhana is also a hierarchical way to reach God, each step in the hierarchy to be achieved through increased knowledge or devotion or both. According to him, the Sahajiya worshipper can be classified into three categories, Pravarta, Sadhak and Sidhha. These three stages are again supplemented by certain 'Asrayas' or methods of worship. These Asrayas are Mantra, Bhava, Prema and Rasa (ibid). Mantra means the chanting of the name of Krishna and Radha, the divine consort. At Sadhak stage, the devotee is usually instructed to follow this method of worship to prepare his body and mind for further stages. At the next stage, the worshipper is introduced to Bhava, which is emotional love for Krisna. At the stage of Prema, the devotee finds himself completely absorbed in the divine love much as Radha found herself absorbed in the love of Krishna. The rasa is an advanced stage of prema when the devotee finds oneness with his God Krishna and realizes the boundless love and satisfaction that can be achieved from oneness with the God. The Bhakti or devotion of the devotee is likewise divided into three stages according to his advancement on this spiritual path. At the first stage, when he is still following a conventional method of worshipping through chanting of the lord's name or performing formal worship, such devotion is called Vaidhi Bhakti (Sarbadhikary 2015). At

the second stage, when he establishes a bond of emotional love with God, that is called Raganuga Bhakti. The final stage of devotion is called Ragatmika Bhakti where oneness of identity between the worshipper and the worshipped is achieved. Paritosa Das also shows that Sahajiya doctrine was an important and old school of Post-Chaitanya Vaishnavism as he shows a direct line of Gurus from the author of 'Chaitanya Caritamrita' Krishnadas Kabiraj, to the author of 'Vivarta Vilasa', Akincan Das, being the two most important texts in the Sahajiya Vaishnav philosophy (Das 1988). It is worth mentioning here that these explanations of the character of God Krishna belong to the Gaudiya Vaishnava Sampradaya, one of the five principal Vaishnavite schools of India, besides other illustrious schools such as Madva sampradaya established by Madhavacharya or the Sree Samparadya established by Ramanuja or the Nimbarka Sampradaya. The principal difference between these other four samparadayas or schools and Gaudiya Vashnav Sampradaya is also illustrative of why Sahajiya sects arose out of the later. The other schools, all more ancient than the Gaudiya school and predating Lord Chaitanya, occupied themselves principally with preparation of Tikas or commentaries of 'Vedanta Sutra' written ostensibly by Vyasa himself. These schools argued in a complex and esoteric manner about the divinity of Krishna and his superiority to the other primordial gods mentioned in older texts. The Gaudiya sampradaya did away completely with the Vedanta Sutra in favor of Bhagabata Purana, which they argued was also written by Vyasa and was the mainstay behind the Vedanta Sutra (Chatterjee 1980). This focus on Bhagabata Purana led them to construct the idea of three types of spiritual planes available for three types of worshippers. These planes were named Mana Vrindavan, Cinmaya Vrindavan and Nitya Vrindavan. Mana Vrindavan was the reflection of Krishna on worshipper's mind when he is performing acts of Vaidhi Bhakti. Divya Vrindavan or spiritual Vrindavan is available to that devotee who has advanced to the stage of Raganuga Bhakti (Sarbadhikary 2015). The final stage of Nitya Vrindavan is a stage of everlasting spiritual delight where the devotee finds Krishna as the manifestation of the perfection of God and completely becomes immersed in the beauty of Krishna and assumes the bhava or character of Radha which is the supreme Bhava or Mahabhava. The Sahajiya worshippers call this stage Sahaj Bhava and they call the perfect image of Krishna as Sahaj Manush or Moner Manush. It is important to remember this spiritual background of the Sahajiya Vaishanvas as these beliefs and practices clearly show the path of evolution from traditional Sahajiya beliefs to the contemporary Sahajiya sampradayas like the Baul.

New Age Religions and New Religious Movements: Modern Understandings of Cult and its Limitations

In the quest to identify oppositional religions, one might want to take a look at New Age Religion which is a movement that has its roots in the United States and Europe from the 1960's. The term is wide and vague and includes a plethora of religious trends or currents ranging from Alien worshippers to millenarian religions which focused on non-mainstream ways to express one's inner search for something greater than the individual. Actually, most New Age Religions began as high-minded endeavors to build a society which will be better and more egalitarian than the present one. Now such lines of thought were not at all uncommon in 19th century continental Europe (Melton 2007). The social experiments done by utopian socialists were premised on similar assumptions. The crucial difference between utopian socialists and New Age Religionists is based on their approach in achieving that future. The New Age supporters, especially of the early period believed in a new messiah or new book of revelations that will guide them. Such revelations often were interpreted by charismatic figures who claimed to have the knowledge of the occult world. The most famous text of the early New Age Movement, 'The Celestine Prophecy' by James Redfield comprehensively captures the mood of the movement (Redfield 1983 in Hanegraaf 2000). It contains all the cardinal features of the New Age movement, namely, a yearning for individual validation and meaning in a mechanized society, a belief in a spiritual journey of self-discovery and awakened consciousness as the principal tool of reaching this prophesied future. Another interesting feature of the New Age movement was its easy assimilation of eastern currents of esotericism with existing western ones. For example, the concepts of Karma and reincarnation have found easy entry into the thought of New Age Religion leaders.

New Religious Movements

Elizabeth Arweck begins with the statement that New Religious Movements (NRM) and cults are synonymous. She also mentions that they are principally found in western societies and they are typically associated with the counter-culture of the 1960's (Arweck, 2005). However, she includes many Indian-origin movements, namely the Hare Krishna

Movement of ISKCON and Osho Foundation as New Age Movements. The definition of NRM is not entirely clear in her writing. Her insistence for only considering those groups which have emerged after the Second World War seems arbitrary as well. Also, she has mentioned a very wide range of social and religious organizations as NRMs. These include, on the one hand, such large and world-renowned organizations such as Sathya Sai Baba Sangsthan and ISKCON to Beshara (a Sufi sect, much ancient than the time frame initially considered by the author); and even fringe groups which worship UFOs and aliens, on the other. She also describes the NRM's as an essentially modern reaction to the mechanization that capitalism forces upon a society and an individual to experience in their personal and public life (ibid). She mentions that a majority of the initiates into NRMs come from modern, affluent backgrounds. In doing so, again a western bias, specifically an American one creeps in her judgment. She also explicitly mentions that a movement, to be considered an NRM, must make use of modern technology to spread its views. It must address the problem of maintaining individuality and finding meaning in an increasingly homogeneous capitalist world. She emphasizes the role of modern media in creating a negative public perception about cults which, according to her, started to emerge after the November 1978 incident of mass suicide of the followers of Jim Jones at Jonestown, Guyana at his cult's base, 'People's Temple' (ibid). It is difficult to create or identify an 'ideal type' of an NRM but a few common characteristics usually can be observed among the majority of such groups. These are mentioned below:

An authoritative central figure- most NRMs have an authoritative founding member, often a charismatic male who creates a hierarchical and often, patriarchal structure in his cult or group where women usually play a secondary role as care-givers or mothers or even as a means for the male members or the guru attaining some kind of spiritual salvation.

A sense of community- Most young people joined the NRMs in the 1960's and 70's out of a sense of not belonging in the society. The triumph of capitalism in the west brought about increased aloofness of the individual both from his or her peers and the traditional family. Traditional large families were in fact, breaking up almost everywhere with the success of commerce and industries which made it necessary for the workers to travel to faraway places for work. The role of the NRMs as the new extended family of the post-industrial

individual becomes clear from the epithets used by the members within the group (especially if the group has an Indian origin leader) where the group leader is referred to as a "baba' meaning father. A female group leader will similarly be called mother and common group members will usually call each other brothers and sisters. Many groups encourage communal living of the members in an idealized self-sufficient society based on utopian norms. The Rajneeshpuram at Oregon, USA was such a place built by the Osho foundation. In India, ISKCON also maintains numerous facilities for simple and communal living of its followers.

The role of women in NRMs- The role of women in such organizations differ widely. While there are groups where male members are discouraged from marrying or asked to live a celibate life, there are also female groups like Brahma Kumaris where women hold the spiritual and executive control. However, even in such groups the effect of traditional gender roles is not absent. The Brahma Kumaris prize the so called 'womanly' qualities of love, devotion and selfless service in their members and only these qualities make a member fit for better positions within the group (Chowdhry 1996).

The negative perception about NRMs which exist in the western societies today have emerged as a result of the practices such as drug abuse, use of scientifically unproven alternative medicines, sexual promiscuity among members and leaders and the tendency to appropriate all aspects of a young person's life by alienating him from his family and friends which became standard practice for many such groups. These negative aspects of many NRMs have led to the formation of a new type of movement, spearheaded by the families of those members of NRMs who feel that their son or daughter has been taken from them and also championed by traditional religious institutions and leaders. Such movements have been given the name 'ACM' or Anti Cult Movement (Barker 1986).

Membership of the NRMs tend to be varied according to the involvement and commitment of the members. Most NRMs seem to have a concentric circle pattern of membership where the most loyal members form the innermost circle around the central figure of the charismatic leader and the new or non-regular members form the outer circles. Some NRMs like Scientology has actually built a formal structure of membership based on such patterns where writings of the founder Ron Hubbard are taught like a university course to the

members. These courses claim to reveal the true nature of the group and further, deeper truths about the world as an initiate progress in his spiritual journey within the group. To advance to the next tier of learned group members, along with knowledge of the leader's doctrine, monetary contributions also become necessary, increasing in demand at every subsequent higher stage.

NRMs usually vehemently deny the label of cult or the more academic label of NRM. They prefer to be called a Church or an extension of a mainstream religion which happens to have found a new and improved way of communicating to God. If ISKCON is considered, it becomes plain that they do not preach or claim to preach anything which is different from traditional Gaudiya Vaishnava teachings (Ketola 2004). They have simply presented these teachings to a new audience or clientele with the help of modern-day techniques and translations. Therefore, instead of accepting they are a heretic sect or an offshoot of an established religious order, they present themselves as the improved or 'pure' form of that religion. According to the author, it is even harder to distinguish between NRMs and established religious orders in continental Europe as there NRMs are often called sects instead of cults.

According to Arweck, the prevalence of Roman Catholic Values in Europe leads Europeans to make this distinction as Catholics tend to call all non-mainstream forms of religions as sects. The existence of several well-established orders such the Church of Latter-Day Saints and Jehovah's Witness, which bore all the marks of being NRMs of their day, make the distinction more problematic (Arweck 2006). The problem is further compounded when some NRMs claim to be different religions altogether, such as Scientology. Often, there are lures of pecuniary benefits (such as being completely tax-exempt, in the case of the United States and many other countries) behind such claims but that claim takes these organizations and movements further away from being considered NRMs.

Cults as 'New Religions' and the requisites for their success

Rodney Stark and Bryan Wilson have been associated with the study of religion since the late 1980s and they have attempted to devise a general theory about the factors responsible

for success or failure of new religious movement. While the scope of their study of new religious movement is limited to American and European examples but they are not limited to the arbitrary imposition of being a 20th century phenomenon as observed in the academic literature on the subject (Stark 1996). According to Stark, a new religious movement begins with a combination of charisma, magic and promise of a new social unit. Such movements can also begin with a claim about an impending future event such as the imminent destruction of civilization. The principal difference between a secular and a religious movement is that the religious movement does not have to promise anything concrete or verifiable. Therefore, the possibility of its followers disconfirming the movement is much less compared to a secular movement. Despite this, as mentioned before, many movements commit the mistake of promising something verifiable as it helps in much faster acquisition of devotees and followers.

Magic can be defined (when associated with religion) as a completely ritualistic way to attain some material or temporal goals. Magic can be associated with healing which was the original function of the Shamans in old religions. In many contemporary religious movements too, healing through faith or some miracles constitute an important part of that movement's narrative. A movement can also employ magic which will supposedly bestow its performers with some supernatural powers (ibid). The ability to perform magic or the ability to be psychic or a medium (both common ways to perform magic employed by many sects) is often considered to pass on from one leader to another designated leader. Such abilities may also be considered to be passed through blood relations. According to Durkheim, magic cannot address the ultimate questions which an established religion claims to answer. Therefore, a religion based on magic alone has no theology (Ibid). Because magic has such limitations, a successful religious movement rends to reduce the amount of magic over a period of time. However, these factors do not fully explain why a cult movement like the Mormons or Jehovah's Witness continues to attract members even after their core prophesies about an impending judgment day failed. This also cannot explain why a religious movement like the Matua succeeded so spectacularly without recourse to either magic or a millenarian prophesy. Stark attempts to answer that riddle with his interpretation of cultural capital. Cultural capital is the result of socialization into a particular culture. In economic terms, this is a two way investment by both the hegemonic

system and the individual who is investing time and effort in learning and remembering a large array of cultural material. Therefore, even if a person is disgruntled with his present mainstream or orthodox religion, he is likely to be keen on retaining as much of his learned cultural capital as possible while exploring new religious avenues. Thus, according to Stark, an American protestant Christian will find it more conducive towards retaining his cultural capital if he joins a sect like the Mormons rather than joining a completely culturally alien sect like the ISKON or other East Asian sects. Here, the failure of the former sect's core prophesy will matter less to influence his decision if the missionaries of that sect are smart enough to devise a rational explanation.

Another factor advanced by Stark in determining the success or failure of a religious movement is the amount of tension that sect is having with its immediate socio-cultural environment. For new heterodox movements this tension is usually very high which on the one hand necessitates continuous struggle with the orthodoxy and on the other hand acts as a beacon for all kinds of radical dissenters. However, a sect or a movement cannot remain in this state indefinitely. The more mature a sect becomes the less tension it will have with orthodoxy. This may lead to eventual factionalism within the sect but it ensures its longevity (Ibid).

The Caste-Sect Dichotomy

In the Indian context it is difficult to segregate between the identities of a caste and a sect because they often show similar characteristics. For example: the principal feature of a caste or a jati under a caste is that membership is acquired only by birth. Now in the western context, the membership of a sect is always open and voluntary. But in the Indian context, it is almost certain that the next generations of a sect member will follow the sect of his forefathers. Also, rules regarding inter-marriage and commensality can be observed in case of Indian sects as well. Prohibitions regarding accepting food from members of other sects can be so severe that the devotee of a certain sect may even refuse to accept prasad prepared by another sect, although that sect may have been worshipping the same deity that he worships, albeit in a different form. Therefore, it is of importance to inspect the process of

recruitment followed by Indian sects. Thapar (Thapar 2003) argues that 300 to 700 AD was a 'threshold' time in the history of Hindu religion as this was when the earliest sects such as the ones formed my Adi Shankara and Ramanuja developed. From then onwards till contemporary times sects are continuously emerging in India. Despite this, a unique feature of Hinduism is that there exists a very large number of non-sectarian followers. Therefore, all recruitments done by sects which do not depend on lineages, are results of active proselytization among the non-sectarians. It is extremely unusual for members of one sect to join another sect. According to Lancy Lobo, even if someone changes his religion his sect identity appears to be intact (Lobo 2019). Also, it is generally the non-sectarians who change their religion since a sectarian will face considerable hostility if he does so. All these attributes are again similar to that of a jati or a caste. Thus, a connection needs to be made between the sectarian formations of the lower castes in order to observe whether the caste and jati identities have completely merged.

Mary Searle-Chatterjee (Chatterjee 1994) attempts to locate this tricky relationship between caste and jati from the more distant viewpoint of one observing the religions. According to her, the term jati is conventionally translated as caste although within the Hindu religion other words such as panth and sampradaya have been used in order to convey the meaning of caste. It is only in the modern times, that those elements who reject the multifaceted nature of the Hindu identity and attempt to conceive Hinduism as a coherent whole who are using the term jati to convey the meaning of caste. Chatterjee (ibid) has invoked many historical instances to demonstrate that even during times of religious upheaval the so-called religious riots may have a deeply caste divided character. She gives the example of the Hindu-Muslim tension in Varanasi after 1992 when the old and establishes Shia Muslim elite of the area sided with BJP because they viewed the local Sunnis, belonging to the poorer weaver Jati of Julaha as others to themselves. Similarly, Sandra Freitag has argued that in early 19th century Varanasi a similar situation occurred when some of the Bhumihar and merchant sects aligned with the section of Muslim against some of the lower Hindu jatis. But this kind of identification of the oppressed jatis with the poor run the risk of viewing the caste divide in India from the angle of a class struggle. This has been the predominant problem with the early Marxist and later subaltern assessments of the subject.

The concept of religious identity of the lower castes and the natural assumption that they belong to the body of Hinduism becomes more problematic when one considers an untouchable caste such as the Chamars or Bhangis. People belonging to these castes use to perform leather working and cleaning of human waste. Therefore, their impure status was the same in the eyes of both Hindu and Muslim elites. These castes often eat meat prohibited by both religions and consume alcohol thereby rendering them unfit for absorbing into any of the major religions. Members of such castes may even identify the Hindu moniker with the upper castes alone and may only identify with the local cult or a sect started by one of their own. The Satnamis are an example of a successful sect of mostly leather workers and other menial labourer jatis who have become quite united and for this reason faced upper caste militancy against them.

The tendency to view the caste problem from a class angle becomes apparent when one views the subaltern studies literature. Ranabir Samaddar (Samaddar 2013) views the problem as one between the rural poor pressed to take up low wage jobs in the city and the Bengali elite. He is intrigued by the fact that despite their being apparently no 'caste question in Bengal' from 1972 to 1980, 3200 people belonging to the scheduled castes and tribes were murdered and more than 5000 of their dwellings were burnt. Studying the election manifesto of one scheduled caste candidate named Paramanada Haldar, Samaddar has shown that only 1.8% of the Class I jobs were populated by the scheduled castes. 60 percent of the beneficiaries of the Operation Barga programme have been Dalits which shows that a majority of landless farmers in Bengal belongs to the scheduled castes (ibid). Despite these data, and his proclivity in identifying the so-called separatist struggles of North Bengal, as struggles between Dalits and the upper castes, Samaddar still cannot deny the leftist conclusion that caste and class realities in Bengal are always intertwined. He understands that a new middle class which emerged in Bengal after the 1960s as a result of the expanding service sector is largely free of caste hierarchy and it is this influential middle class which claims that Bengal is unique in India as there is no caste discrimination in here. Although Samaddar understands the fallacy of this position, but he, like Ashok Mitra sees no political manoeuvring from the caste groups and no lower caste associations to speak of. In assuming so he basically leaves the entire rural formal and informal organizations of the lower castes from his purview (ibid).

The premise of this study is a large one which draws together two apparently unrelated groups (till a proper nomenclature can be agreed upon), Matuas and Baul. In fact, some may argue that they are not comparable at all since one is a religious sub-group and another is a group of social and religious heretics. But both these groups have transcended their narrow categories and have become important components of Bengals' mainstream social and political life. Bauls have emerged from their stigmatized identification as a heretical, sexually deviant sub-sect of Vaishanvism to the most identifiable and treasured cultural symbol of Bengal. On the other hand, Matuas have emerged from a little-known group of the Namasudra caste to the most politically organized and economically sound pressure group of Bengal. It can be said that they are the first true representatives of caste based politics in post-independence Bengal and as such a new and fearsome entity for the entrenched Bengali 'Bhadrolok' or educated high caste sections of Bengal who occupy most important places of politics and high culture.

This researcher wishes to argue that the cultural omnipresence of the Baul in Bengal's public imagery and discourse is connected to the dwindling influence of the numerically small but disproportionately powerful Bhadralok section. The Bhadralok are a unique phenomenon of Bengal. They are mostly a cultural section comprising members cutting across barriers of class but seldom of caste. Because of Bengal's unique advantage during the British rule as the centre of economy, English education and government jobs, access to the later two have been for long the true signifiers of class in Bengal. This is unlike the Northern or southern India where status is invariably linked with ownership of land or ritual status.

Bhadralok is a pretty flexible social group in terms of inclusion of members. A lower division clerk earning just above subsistence salary can be considered a bhadralok since he has a permanent job. However, a sweetmeat seller, although earning may be ten or twenty times that amount may still not be considered a bhadralok. This is why a particularly interesting practice can be observed in the successful middle income business families of Bengal. Most of these families belong to a ritually lower caste and they are not considered to be civil or bhadralok. Therefore, they try earnestly to get their next generations educated

so that they can also be counted among the bhadrolok. Often, such degrees that they earn do not at all reflect on their work which they may later take up as part of the family business. Traditional scholars of the caste system in India such as M.N. Srinivas, Sekhar Bandopadhyay and even B.R. Ambedkar have dwelled on the Barna/Jati dichotomy when considering the caste system. A common thread among the works of these scholars is that they consider the concept of Varna to be the beginning of a stratified social system in India. According to them, this system began at around 5th century BC as a somewhat fluid division of work. Although they concur that by the 3rd century AD, the Varna system has become quiet rigid with the Brahmins dominating the system along with the Khatriyas (Srinivas 1957). Varna was a macro level identifier of a person's social status which gradually lost its relevance to ascertain the original position of a person or a family in his immediate society. Interestingly, when the colonial masters wanted to conduct a census and wanted to draw clear lines of distinction between their Indian subjects, they introduced a clear-cut written form of the caste system. In doing so, they faced the incredible amount of local diversity that exists in the Indian system of Jati. Faced with such difficulties, the British relied heavily on the concept of Varna as a Pan-Indian system of classification already existing in India. Therefore, a lot of jatis were clubbed together in broader categories and many were included within the ambit of such Varnas which were either traditionally lower or higher than their traditionally ascribed status. This is the beginning of a great ambiguity in Indian social system regarding caste.

M. N. Srinivas further stated the importance of two social processes in India namely, Sanskritisation and Westernisation which affects the categories of caste and their relative standing and social conduct. Under the thematic of sanskritisation, a ritually lower or 'impure' caste (really a jati) can attain respectability in the local society by emulating the behavior and customs of a ritually higher caste (Srinivas 1956). Such behavioral changes may not always elevate the position of a jati within a generation or even two but subsequent generations may indeed attain a hitherto unattainable level of respectability. But Srinivas also emphasized that such upward mobility of a jati may not always be a result of emulating a ritually higher caste. A jati may decide to emulate a locally powerful jati of peasants or businessmen or Ksatriya instead of one belonging to the Brahmin Varna. It is also the case in some parts of India such as Punjab and Haryana where the local landowning castes such

as Jats, Gujars and Ahirs are so powerful that they look down upon Brahmins and Brahmins enjoy no real power in such societies. It was even argued by Srinivas that the success of a emulating lower jati depends largely on its own economic condition, especially on ownership of land. For example, the Patidars of Gujarat are a strong landowning caste who at first imitated the local Banias as they used to dress and behave in a rural society years ago. Later on, after they got comfortable with their newfound higher status, they eventually let go many of such emulating practices, However, now another lower caste group of Gujarat is emulating the Patidars as they behaved years ago in order to secure ascendency in the caste ladder (Shah 1987).

Identities are notoriously hard to define and it is harder to maintain the claim to exclusivity of any people who have embodied a certain identity. A category and an identity are structurally similar but their notional difference rests on the point of exclusivity. Ontologically, an identity is one dimensional or focused whereas a category may be intertwined with others. Therefore, one faces considerable difficulties while attempting to categorize groups like Matua and Baul. The researcher faces even greater hurdles to explain the rationality behind introducing these two apparently disjointed categories as the foci of a research. The first problem that a researcher encounters is that of defining these groups against the set categories of caste, jati or samaj. Caste is a relatively recent classification adopted by the British for the purpose of conducting census (and thereby optimizing taxation on the land). Their idea of caste is India was a conflation of the ideas of particular profession based 'jati', particular cultural affiliations and practice based 'Samaj' and 'jati' based on the concept of purity of blood stretched to the point of fetishization. It can be argued that the emphasis on blood purity is the essence of caste but that is a questionable assumption in light of the development of caste identity in post-colonial India. Movements for inclusion into the category of the 'Scheduled castes' (and therefore, becoming one with the lower castes, even untouchable ones) are not proving to be daunting enough for younger aspiring members of many castes. Caste as jati has not lost its relevance in Indian politics or society, far from it. But increased urbanization and rapid movement of agrarian labour from villages to unorganized labour sectors in the urban areas have meant that old professions are being given up in favour of more lucrative opportunities. The all-encompassing control of the village society is breaking down for these economic migrants

for whom the village once was lebensraum, holy land and market. The cosmopolitan city frequently reveals its cattiest underbelly to these labourers in the form of ghettoized living and discrimination in terms of wages and other benefits. Still, the city is far less restrictive than the closed village society. In such a situation, jati loses out to the concept of Samaj, which is about 'khan-pan-rahan-sahan' or cultural characteristics of a group. Interestingly, such characterization is not only used as a tool for identification and consolidation of group identity, but it is also used to profess superiority over other groups. Sometimes, the claimed 'differences' between these cultural practices are so minuscule and intricate that they can take comical proportions. For example, in 'Culturalization of Caste', Balmurli Natrajan mentions two different Kumhar or potter groups of Bihar where one group considers itself as superior to the other group because the second group uses a stick to turn the potter's wheel while the former only use their bare hands (Natrajan 2011). Although such differences may appear trivial to the detached observer but these in fact, bear very serious meaning to the members of such groups, to the extent of excluding other groups in terms of connubial relations.

The author of this chapter has observed that the growing clout of a globalized 'market' in the cities and smaller towns of the country is also a potent source for change in Jati based identifications or discriminations. For example, cutting of hair or shaving was considered a low job performed by a particular jati (called 'Napit'/'Shil' etc. in Bengal). This particular jati, traditionally known for their cunning and intelligence was still considered to belong to a pretty low caste, despite the occasional royal patronage shown upon them for their qualities. However, the early 21st century suddenly made stars out of hairdressers and neighborhood barber shops started turning into high-end salons. From a chore, cutting one's hair became an 'experience'. Along with a clear capitalist relation between client and service provider, came the trappings of sophistication and professionalism. Now, any upper caste entrepreneur will not hesitate to open a salon in any part of India because the profession has been shorn off its 'jati' baggage. A similar trend can be observed in case of selling liquor (where the customer and seller both have dropped the moral baggage associated with this act to such an extent that buying liquor in some shops now resembles buying grocery from a supermarket) or selling and making personalized clothes and jewelry. In such a scenario, culture-based differentiations appeal more to the urban labourer

than his ancient ties with profession. It can also be argued that in a large urban settlement where congregation of large number of people from different 'Samaj' occurs frequently; such differences become more apparent than in a closed village society where one seldom meets outsiders. Natrajan has called this ascension of culture as the defining factor in caste identity a 'Culturalization of Caste' (Natrajan 2011). According to him, such considerations now supersede considerations of ritual purity or blood purity. He has termed this phenomenon as 'Fetishization of Culture'. An interesting observation that he makes in this regard is that such emphasis on culture has rendered two of the biggest challenges to the traditional concepts of caste virtually meaningless. Here he is mentioning Ambedkar's idea of complete destruction of caste differences through constitutional affirmative action and simultaneous social movements. Secondly, he is considering the 'silent' revolution that the political empowerment of lower caste groups in India has wrought, as exemplified by the political success of DMK or Bahujan Samajwadi Party. Natrajan believes that such political frictions between the traditionally dominant and the lower castes and the eventual victory of the lower castes could have been explained earlier by way of a conscious political regeneration of the lower castes and even some form of class consciousness (ibid). But culturalization of caste enables the dominant political narrative to show such struggles merely as frictions between different cultures and extension of democracy to a hitherto uninitiated culture. Such dilution renders all future attempts at a comprehensive struggle against the domination of upper-caste unlikely.

The Question of Dalit Identity

According to Zelliot, Dalit is originally a Marathi word which means ground or broken or reduced to pieces. According to her, the word was chosen by the group itself and they have used it proudly. Other words such as untouchable, scheduled caste, depressed classes or Harijan are all words used by outsiders to denote this group. None of these words are sufficient to express the severe down-trodden status of these people. But 'Dalit' incorporates an inherent denial of the ideas of purity and pollution and the caste hierarchy. The word Dalit first began to be discussed from the point of view of literature and later took on a radical political meaning through the Dalit Panthar movement. Zelliot quotes

Gangadhar Pantawane in giving a clearer definition of Dalit as "... he does not believe in God, rebirth, soul, holy books teaching separatism, faith and heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of chance and revolution" (Zelliot 1992). Therefore, it can be observed that Zelliot defines the Dalit in terms of a radical rejection of the caste-Hindu social order which legitimized poverty and untouchability and inclusion into or exclusion from a religion is important in her scheme of Dalit identity. This is why the conversion of Mahars to Buddhism was a key theme in her writings. In her opinion, the Dalit identity is essentially modern, a result of colonial education and the stark reality of caste oppressions which became more apparent than ever to the section of educated Dalits from the later part of the 19th century. Despite this insistence of modern lineage, she draws certain parallels with middle aged Bhakti saints such as Chokha Mela or Tukaram who led egalitarian movements and accepted untouchable disciples (ibid). Seeing Dalit movement and Dalit identity as an essentially modern one, she compares it with the extremely political Black identity in the United States which emerged at the same time (ibid). Indeed, many striking similarities exist between the two movements. For example: both movements identified some major religions and its intrinsic structures as a root cause of their problems and sought to convert to a different and more egalitarian religion. While in case of the Blacks or at least a section of them, absolution came through conversion to Islam. Malcolm X being one of the most charismatic preachers of Black American Islam. Similarly in case of the Dalit movement, Buddhism was embraced by Ambedkar and his followers as the final and only way to escape their oppression and lowly status under Hinduism. Zelliot doesn't seem to notice that unlike the Black movement, Buddhism was not a central option for Ambedkar or the Dalits as long as there was hope for political importance in independent India. It is finally, his utter political defeats in the 1946 elections which propelled Ambedkar to lose faith a political solution and to look for a religious one instead.

G.N. Shah presents a different view of Dalit identity which is highly constitutional and judicial in nature. He includes all scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and other backward classes within the ambit of Dalit. However, he maintains that it is the scheduled caste who should actually be called Dalits. He identifies the Ati-shudras or Avarnas placed at the bottom of the caste hierarchy as the Dalits (Shah 2001). This identification is problematic

though, because all scheduled castes are not ati-shudras and neither are they all untouchables. He identifies the Dalits as the result of a great failure of the Hindu social order in its scheme o distribution. Therefore, the Dalit identity is synonymous with appalling economic inequality, especially in terms of ownership of land. Shah emphasizes the economic aspect of Dalit identity where Dalit means small and marginal farmers, bonded labourers, fisherman and begaar workers (ibid). The term Dalit also encompassed certain traditional caste occupations which would not be taken up by any other castes. Therefore, leather workers, weavers, scavengers etc. all fall under this Dalit identity.

Like Zelliot, Shah also shows the militant and radical tendencies inherent in the Dalit identity. The atrocities against Dalits in post-independence India is as such a result of caste prejudice as it is the result of anger of the upper castes for loosing their hereditary strong positions, land and jobs. Such violence is also a reaction against the economic success of Dalits who have found profitable markets for their caste occupational skills such as leather working.

Gopal Guru argued that Dalit identity conveys the aspirations and struggles of Dalits for change and revolution (Guru 2011). On the other hand, for Kancha Ilaiah, the Dalit Bahujan identity is to be understood in terms of a Marxist movement which existed in a proto-materialist form in the ancient ideologies of Charbaka and the Lokayatas (Ilaiah 2019).

The present question is whether the Bauls and the Matuas truly fit into this Dalit identity or to what extent do they accept this identity? The Matuas and the Namashudras in general have a history of close association with Ambedkar and his scheduled caste federation. After the demise of Guruchand Thakur, Jogendranath Mondal became the tallest leader of the depressed classes in Bengal. After Ambedkar's electoral defeat, he was instrumental in Ambedkar's election to the Constituent Assembly from a reserved seat in Bengal. However, the Namashudras didn't follow Ambedkar's lead in joining Buddhism and stayed loyal to their Matua identity. This Ambedkarite association has lead to the emergence of a section of educated Matuas who follow his ideology and explain the teachings of the Matua founders as renewed teachings of the Buddha. They attempted to find traces of Buddhist

practices in the ritual of the Namshudra and claim a Pala era Buddhist lineage for the Namashudras.

Dalit identity is much more problematic for the Bauls. Although belonging mostly to the scheduled castes the Bauls never embraced the quintessential political tone of the Dalit identity. They never associated themselves with national or regional politics and never associated with Ambedkarite movement. A large section of them especially the Bauls of the Rarh region of Bengal profess to be Vaishnavas. The Muslim Fakirs, consider to represent the same cultural values as the Bauls is also a very far from embracing the Dalit identity. It can't be denied that the Bauls have suffered both social oppression and untouchability but that did not forge a radical political identity as the Dalit.

A general theory of dissent and the Indian perspective

The word dissent is derived from Latin 'Dissentere' which means to differ in sentiment but can also mean withholding assent. The standard definition provided by Oxford English dictionary adds that it can mean criticizing the status-quo and that it should be intentional and critical. The semantic variations alone offer a glimpse into what Ben Dorfman would later call 'a refracted vision'. The first time when a large group of people received the label of dissenters was in the 16th and the 17th century England when groups such as the Quakers, Anabaptists (Menonite church) and the Puritans challenged the authority of the Church of England (Mack 2000). Whereas the Puritans criticized the Church in a rational way, the two former denominations focused on more personal spiritual connections thereby forming a conceptual link with the revolt of the Sahajiyas against the Brahminical doctrine of Chatur Varna.

Barbara Falk in his article 'Refractions: Dissent and Memory', presents the view that dissent is doing something other than ordinary (Falk 2016). It is an emphatic 'no' said to monolithic regimes. Dorfman was spurred by the movements of 80s and 90s which occurred on the cusp of USSR's breakdown. But disillusionment with neo-liberal democracies soon moved the popular sentiment towards the culture of apathy. In the same publication, Ben Dorfman expresses his view regarding the character of dissent and all those movements

which stood against the grain of globalization such as the Occupy Wall Street Movement were termed by him as Contemporary Iterations of Political Dissent (Dorfman 2016).

One of his key observations regarding dissent is that 'Dissent always has to pull its head above surface and become known'. What this signifies is that the kind of infra-politics envisioned by James C. Scott does not qualify as valid forms of dissent under Dorfman's scheme as they never 'become known' but exists in an intra-mural space between the realities of the oppressor and the oppressed. However, the dangers of Dorfman's assumptions becomes plain when he qualifies even the 9/11 attacks as a form of dissent. In his own words, he views dissent as a conceptual kaleidoscope and the observer only enjoys what he calls a 'refracted' view of dissent (ibid).

Barbara Falk (Falk, 2016) takes a typical post colonialist view of dissent and sees it as necessarily a reaction against the elite. However, she views it as double-edged sword which can also provide legitimation to the ruling elite. According to her dissent is different from resistance, which might include everyday activities of disobeying an authority such as performing a go-slow at a factory or simply retreating into one's private sphere (ibid). Dissent requires entering into the public sphere and because it is purposeful and public in nature therefore dissent is always political. The history of dissent really begins with the emergence of the concept of toleration of the 'other'. The first mention of such considerations can be found in John Lock's *Letter on Toleration.* This view is also typically post-Westphalian in nature where the Other was tolerated but always considered inferior. In Falk's view, there is a thin line between violence and dissent. She mentions Gandhian tactics as the best example of showing dissent sans violence (ibid). Dissent without violence may be possible in democratic systems and in those colonial societies where the powerful is beholden to a democratic system at home. However, such forms of dissent is not feasible or fated for success in any authoritarian system. Therefore, the mere coexistence of violence, without regard to its severity and scope can't disqualify a political act from being termed as dissent.

In a 2021 monograph named 'Voices of Dissent: An Essay' Romila Thapar opines that study of dissent is essential to understand how civilizations evolved. She believes that dissent was

present in Indian society since ancient times. It may not always have existed as a conscious act but it may have been recognized by the dominant thoughts of that period (which can be termed as the self of that era's accepted consciousness) to create a sense of the other. This other may have used dissent to distinguish itself and to consolidate a following. In this case of religions, that is how sects often started. But that is also how informal forms of dissent becomes formalized (Thapar 2021).

In pre-colonial India, the dominant religions had three options to deal with the emergent dissenting voices. They could either be persecuted, or assimilated or just left on their own whereby they would eventually become just another sect and not threaten the established order too much. Since this third way was the most rational and palatable, therefore religious dissent was usually allowed to be formalized and be preached to such large numbers that the exclusivity of the 'other' got dissipated and rebel sects eventually came to form the self or mainstream of the major religions (ibid).

After this spirited start, in her long and rather rambling piece which is styled as an essay, hence conveniently shorn of any form of referencing, Thapar stretches the idea of dissent too much. Every act of religious significance is counted as some form of dissent. Moreover, the discourse on dissent in India devolves into her lifelong project of creating a secular history of India where the 'middle age', that is, the period of Muslim rule sits on a similar moral ground as the political systems of ancient India (ibid).

Thapar's tryst with the idea of dissent in ancient India is quite old. In an 1981 article, Thapar tried to show that those who don't realize that Indian civilization has a continuous and long history of dissent are actually anti-Indians who over simplify the Indian society (Thapar 1981). However, she makes one incisive observation regarding the contemporary social commentators of India who are mostly informed by an orthodox Marxist worldview. They often tend to believe that all dissent must have a materialistic underpinning and philosophical themes of dissent could be ignored. It was a common practice by them to view traditional Indian religions as free from dogma and therefore the contest between orthodoxy and heterodoxy was ignored. In making these assumptions, these commentators ignored the fact that all major India religions show plenty of sectarian dogmatism which

has even led to violent intersect struggles in the past. Thapar correctly points out that 'secularization' of terms like dissent and non-conformity is a relatively recent phenomenon even in the Western world. In ancient Indian society these were expressed as 'vibheda' and 'asammati', within a religious framework (ibid). Dissent can be ideological challenging an established belief system. However, till such challenges leads to mobilized action, it cannot be called 'protest'. A protesting group is eventually politicized and after acquiring recognition and influence may become the next dominant ideology. There is a wide band of activities and positions between passive dissent and active violent protest. A very common form of dissent in India was to renounce the society but those renunciations which were done to promote a personal spiritual journey cannot be classified as dissent because those who renounced their social obligations, neither preached negative principles vis-a-vis the established religious order nor did they try to establish an alternate form of society. "As such they were not promoting dissent but a counter-culture'.

Thapar's sudden introduction on the concept of counter-culture in context of the present discussion is somewhat jarring because for the upper castes of India such migration from mainstream society was in itself a form of dissent. Although it may not have been so for the lower castes who were sometimes forced by circumstances to join such groups of renunciates. Eventually these groups restricted membership, and came to be patronized by the upper classes.

The renunciates sometimes joined orders that stayed outside the society only in name and some even managed large estates. Those who performed strict penance or other punishing forms of meditations and worships were considered to be imbued with divine power. They were never treated as outcastes. Herein lies the dilemma of locating the Sahajiyas in the spectrum of dissenting religious sects. As they were never accorded similar treatment by the society at large despite renouncing the material world and undergoing their own form of penance and meditations.

There is evidence of dissenting schools of thoughts such as Charvaka and Lokayata which are found mention in the criticisms offered by mainstream Brahminic texts although most of their original works are now lost. It can also be argued that a renunciate in ancient India

be it an Ajivika or a Vikshu of the Buddhist sangha lived in a parallel society under the aegis of their respective Sangha but he still was taking part in acts of dissent aimed at the caste system because such Sanghas, especially the Buddhist and the Jain ones had the custom of eating together, taking only cooked food as alms and shaving ones head all aimed at breaking the caste barrier (all Brahmin mendicants never accepted cooked food except from Brahmin households because that would cause a serious caste pollution).

The Brahmins were not kind to these 'wayward' renunciate dissenters and orthodox Brahmins called them 'pasandas' evidence of which are to be found in Ashokan edicts (Thapar 2021). however, it is not clear whether this term conveyed any sense of hostility before the late puranic era when works like the 'brihad-dharma purana' attributed pasandas with the same negative qualities as the yavanas who were the destroyers of the land's true dharma. Therefore, one can observe that dissent was largely kept confined to alternative societies or organizations and even encouraged with political patronage but it was never allowed to grow into a full-scale citizens revolt. Interestingly, groups originally excluded from the Varnashrama system such as the 'dasa-bhritaka' (slaves) and chandalas were not included in most dissenting groups and their membership was actively discouraged (ibid). Thapar points out that the only feasible way for the lower castes to break free of the shackles of the caste system and to not be considered as low status outcastes was to form a religious sect. A sect could build an institutional base by securing the support of a wealthy section of society who resented their low ritual position ordained by the Brahmins. Therefore, sects in India always represented the social aspirations of a particular group of people. Sects which built such institutional structured eventually morphed into parallel societies, thereby avoiding a direct confrontation with the system. Thapar expressed this phenomenon as "the parallel system impinged upon but did not disrupt society" (ibid).

There are a few problems with Thapar's analysis. For example, in cases where the entirety of the dissenting group is already considered to be of low status then the challenge to the system might be direct. The Satnami movement is a case in point (Singh 2000). Moreover, Thapar somehow assumes that all such groups or parallel societies will be groups wholly or partially formed by renunciates with a vow of celibacy and that they will always be closed groups. But even a parallel society can become like a regular society where the

leaders themselves lead a pious householder's life and the whole sect imitates their example. Such groups if they have restricted memberships should be considered as groups of dissenters otherwise groups such as the Kartabhaja and the Matuas do not qualify as religious dissenters. Thapar also ignores the millenarian ideas that are evident in some of these groups where a future saviour is anticipated who will destroy the unjust system which they protest. The figures of Kalki avatara and Buddha Maitreya are somewhat mainstream examples of this. Thapar does acknowledge that such groups may eventually form a caste of their own by identifying a section which can break the vow of celibacy but she maintains that such sects may become restricted to certain existing castes and stop representing their original aspirations and dissents (Thapar 2021). But it can be argued that the success of dissent is contingent upon the degree of change brought about in the status of the lay followers. The Lingayat sect for example managed to uplift their status in whole by empowering and uplifting their lay followers. But one can agree with Thapar's final conclusion that dissent was more frequently resorted to, in the uniquely Indian way discussed above, rather than protest with an element of violence and a tilt towards rigidity.

This identification of dissent or opposition with religion, especially popular religions has been analyzed according to a Gramscian understanding by Dwight B. Billings (Billings, 1990). He points out that religion in society has always played a dual function- on one hand as the apologists and the legitimizers of status quo and on the other hand as a means of protest. But it is erroneous to assume that religion can alone spark a rebellion. Billings mentions Eugene Genovese who said that religion acts as an autonomous mediating sphere between oppression and opposition. Factors such as the degree of orthodoxy of the established order, degree of bureaucratization and formalism, ideological factions, sectarianism or millenarianism do not necessarily lead to an oppositional stance. The factors which might lead to an oppositional stance are-

- the potential reward for a group- usually one of the dominant ones
- homogeneity of membership
- a theological tradition at variance with the existing order.

Despite the effort of Billings, "Gramsci's contribution to the sociology of religion remains obscure" (ibid) and Gramsci took this ambivalent position because hegemony is not cultural

dominance rather a political accomplishment of the ruling class. In order to achieve this the dominant group must connect the perceived interests of different cultural groups. Even Marx recognized that at the level of superstructure, the religious beliefs of the dominant class are never the only existing ideas. The dominant ideas must always be established in context of a conflict with the protest of the oppressed. However, Gramsci did not have a positive view regarding the capacity of popular religion to provoke a real protest of the oppressed. He viewed these religions (one has to remember while reading Gramsci that what was popular religion in the West before 20th century corresponds quite well with the major sects as seen in Hindu religion) as imperfect spill overs of the dominant religious beliefs mixed with superstitions which made it difficult for the proletariat to be driven by a rational political goal of programme against the ruling class.

Such connections between religion and dissent as a movement has also been discussed by John Clammer in a recent book (Clammer, 2020). He mentions "dissent and the movements it spawns are sites in which transgressions and transformations take place" (ibid). He views dissent primarily from an angle of social movements but he acknowledged the crucial role religion can play in such social movements. Clammer's conception of transgression and transformation are extremely relevant of the present study. Both the Matuas and the Bauls occupy a social space where their existence primarily depends on such acts performed by them as we see in the case of Bauls. The act of transgression is of supreme importance and the body as well as the Bauls society becomes the very site of such transgressions. Whereas in the case of Matuas transgressions are limited to the 'traditional' dissenting ways of commensality and exogamy. However, for them the transformation is social, political as well as political. Their very attempts at political organization and financial self sufficiency causes such transformations which imbibes them with political agency and thereby posits the ultimate challenge to the status quo.

Anne Murphy (Murphy, 2015) while exploring the concept of dissent in South Asian religions has laid special emphasis on the core character of Indian religions where dissent is intermeshed in the very fabric of these religions. While the Buddhist Sangha and the Jain seminaries emerged on the very premise of dissenting the late Vedic Hindu religion, the tradition of dialogue and respecting difference of opinions which can be observed in the Aranyaks and the Upanishads are testament to the fact that ancient India reared a healthy

tradition of dissent. Even Amartya Sen mentioned that an extensive and ubiquitous tradition of debate is a hallmark of Indian cultural identity.

Dissent as a subaltern Initiative

Gyan Prakash (Prakash, 1994) has presented the general idea of subaltern and its criticisms in his 'Subaltern Studies as post-colonial criticism' where he acknowledges that the principal limitation of a subaltern study is that the subaltern has never written. Therefore, any study of their history and their protests must always be gleamed from the readings of the classical historical texts and other classical records. Therefore, the subaltern studies scholar must employ methods similar to that of Foucault or other deconstructivism thinkers. However, this approach of arriving at a subaltern history ignores the very text and oral source materials of which there is a sizable corpus among the popular religious sects such as the Bauls and the Matuas. In other way it can be said that the subaltern approach suffers from the severe limitation of the almost unquestioning acceptance of the 'West' (i.e., West as the sole source of knowledge and reason). Thus, these scholars cannot approach such source materials without submitting to the Western or colonial system of knowledge- the very thing they should be replacing. It is for this reason that religion by and large has been ignored by the entire subaltern studies collective. Another problem with how subaltern studies views dissent in a post-colonial society is that they find it necessary to have a colonial encounter first in order for the subject to be considered by them. However, it can be argued that not all colonial encounters may be encounters with an industrial western nation. When India had encounters with the Armenians and the Portuguese, they did not encounter a civilization more advanced than them an that is the story of many other societies that leaves a void in the understanding of the subaltern studies when it comes to religious transformations by dissenting groups. For example, the Matuas may be analyzed from a subaltern standpoint because their emergence and rise to prominence was definitely a colonial event but the Bauls carry a lineage of dissent stemming from the early Middle Age of India which the subaltern studies is poorly equipped to analyze.

Ranajit Guha differs somewhat form these assumptions about subaltern studies and maintains that it is not in the business of ignoring the dominant narrative in favour of the

narrative of the oppressed Rather it wishes to reclaim that narrative for the dominated (Guha in Prakash 1992). In the creation of the historiography of the dominated, the dominant has not used hegemony in a Gramscian sense but asserted pure dominance. So, a primary objective of the subaltern studies should be to study the subaltern subject and their actions as independent of the elite. Thus, when something like a peasant rebellion is studied there must be attempts to see beyond the simple causalities of misrule or class domination and factors such as religious dogmatism, sectarian struggles and the role of popular religion must be given due importance.

Indian Sects and Cults and their connection with the dissent discourse:

The history of dissent in the Indian context leads to the various sects and cults that emerged within Hinduism with a very broad understanding of Hinduism itself. However, categories applied by the Western sociologists cannot be freely applied in the case of Hinduism. Hinduism is not a church and can hardly be said to have denominations in the Western fashion, at least in the present age. While it is true that in ancient and medieval India, the Shakta, the Shaiva and the Vaishnava worked very much like denominations like the Catholics and the Protestants. Much like these two Christians denominations, the Hindu once also fought violently with each other. But in the present day, one can observe that Hinduism encompasses many sects, but their functioning is nothing like their Christian counterparts. To be a Christian, one has to follow one Christian sect or the other. Whereas Hindus can practice their religion independent of sects. This theological independence makes it difficult to determine whether a practicing Hindu is following a sect, or a cult or is practicing independently with influence from one or more sects. Sharma defines cult as a ‘complex of religious activity directed towards a common object of reverence’ .(Sharma 1970).

This object can be a deity, some natural phenomenon or even a living person. This later characteristic presents an avenue to classify groups such as the Matuas and the Bauls and also Serbs to highlight their mutual differences. Another critical difference between a Christian sect or cult and a Hindu one is that, in the latter case the members are unified by their common devotion to the same object, and not by some dogma. The members of a Hindu sect must have certain common views about practising their religion but that does

not deter them from worshipping the deity of another sect or attending the ritual ceremonies of another cult. In the case of Christianity, membership of a sect is exclusive. One cannot be a Jehovah's witness and a Seventh Day Adventists at the same time. Unlike Christian sects, the central shrine and its priests play a more limited role in case of the Hindu cults. Visiting the central shrine or mandir is usually a yearly affair and regular worship may very well take place at home or at a local shrine. Sharma has observed two cults of Kangra Valleyin India namely the Balaknath and Ludrunath Cults and has come to the conclusion that the greater a cults geographical spread is, the lesser will be the importance of its chief priests or Mahanta (ibid). She also holds the view that embedded at village level, these cults stay firmly within a homogenous religious audience. Such cults can thrive if their target clientele or devotees belong to a single caste group.

Sharma's conclusions are difficult to generalize. If a cult is supported by an urban clientele of devotees and businessmen who can mix commerce with religion and spread the cult much like a centralized business organization then the extent of the geographical spread of the cult will not hamper or lessen the importance of the central shrine or figure rather it will be enhanced. Secondly, it is difficult to find a truly homogenous population in terms of caste in all but the most rural and remote settings of India. In a normal urban or rural environment, the potency of a cult to penetrate the religious space of practitioners across caste line depends on the caste and social status as well as the rituals endorsed by the founding figure of the cult. For example, considering Ramakrishna Mission as a modern-day cult, it can be observed that its membership cuts across caste lines and fellow members do not show any reservations towards each other depending on their caste status at least within the boundaries of its institutions. However, in case of the Matuas since the original founder belonged to a ritually impure caste, more than a century of living side by side has not been able to secure the participation of the upper class of Bengali Bhadralok in the rituals of the Matua. A bhadralok may actually face denigration and threats of ritual demotion by paying homage to the shrines of such low caste's sect as the Matua. There can be certain variations regarding the acceptance of such cults based on how much political and economic power they acquire. Such a discussion is irrelevant in the case of the Bauls and still too early for the Matuas. But a nice parallel can be drawn with a novel sect of Tamil Nadu which is based around a man named Muthuramalingam Thevar who belonged to the

influential Mukula Thevar community of Tamil Nadu (Pandian 2012). Despite the Thevar enjoying a secondary status compared to the Brahmans and the Lingayats, his cult formed during his lifetime and received eager acceptance from all branches of the Thevars. His cult has grown to such a status, despite its founder dying as early as 1975, that now influential leaders belonging to upper castes are also paying homage at his samadhi (ibid). This phenomenal success is largely due to his association with the Indian National Congress and his status as a political reformer. When one sees the growing realization in Bengal about the reform activities of Guruchand Thakur and the present political clout of the Matuas, it becomes an interesting observation for the future to note the caste identities of future Matua followers.

Contemporary views on the theory of Caste

Sociologists and anthropologists look at caste differently. Sociologists have a truncated view of caste. They see class and caste as different modes of stratification. Where the only major distinction between the two is that membership to the former is open while the second acts as a closed group. They view the caste system as an essentially Indian system which is driven by the dual systems of honor and purity. Giddens and Chinoy both seemed to share this view as well but such an understanding over looks that systems based on honor exists in many other countries and cultures (Kolarz 2011). For example: almost all the Mediterranean cultures practice a social system based on 'honor and shame'. It is such a serious business even in contemporary times that blood feuds and vendettas arising out of some incident which purportedly brought shame unto a family often end in bloodshed. Also, if one views the caste system solely from the standpoint of purity and pollution then one fails to see the "flow of rituals and ritual prohibitions which pre occupy all members of caste- organized communities in their everyday activities" (Sharma 1994).

Another limitation of the sociological approach as found in the work of Giddens is that it takes a simplistic and hierarchical view of caste arranged neatly under the Chaturvarna system where all the Jatis (defined as local groups under which caste ranks are organized). Such an approach is misleading because firstly, the Chaturvarna system does not exist in its 'pure' form in most of contemporary India. For example, in Bengal there are actually only

two Varnas- the Brahmin and the Sudras. But in a field visit any researcher would encounter a very large number of sub-castes who profess to hail from one of the middle varnas and by and large their claims are also accepted in the Bengali society. This shows the limitations of the Varna system in classifying or analyzing the phenomenon of caste in contemporary times. Secondly, it is important to understand that Jatis are not subsets of Varna but groups based on kinship and marriage as well as groups connected through an original profession. Thirdly, it is problematic to say that Brahmins being the highest and purest of the Varna are always at the top of the caste hierarchy at any given society in India. Brahmins are in fact divided into hundreds of Jatis themselves. The ritualistic claims of many such Jatis are disputed and challenged by other Brahmin Jatis. Another strange fact is that, it is generally understood that the supremacy of the Brahmin Varna was established on the basis of their access of priesthood, in contemporary times Brahmins engaged in priestly activities as their primary source of income are usually seen as enjoying a low status compared to their fellow brahmins. However, this is not true in case of the hereditary brahmin priests of the principal Hindu shrines of India, many of whom have amassed great wealth and political power. Fourthly, not only the claims to brahminhood of some Brahmin Jatis are disputed but some of them are even regarded as Shudras by other Brahmins. Such accusations probably stem from these Brahmins accepting Shudra pupils or performing rituals for Shudra disciples, both of which are considered highly polluting affairs for a true Brahmin. In fact, it is interesting to note that, according to the much-contested Laws of Manu, a Brahmin is not even allowed to accept a payment for performing a puja or sacrifice. He can only accept the alms which are given to him freely otherwise he risks falling from his status as Brahmins. Fifthly, it is a gross simplification of the Indian caste system to assume that because Brahmins belong to the ritually purest category, they will naturally dominate society. Society is, in fact, dominated by wielders of political and economic power and there are plenty of examples in India where the Brahmins are not considered as the leaders of society because do not possess these qualities. In Rajasthan or Haryana of present-day India, Brahmins scarcely feature in the power structure, if at all. Whereas in the former state, the Kshatriya Rajputs have always wielded power, in case of the later, it is the landowning caste of Jaats who control the state as well as the society. While it is true that even in these societies, Brahmins never face the kind of persecution that a lower caste or an outcaste

group might face, but they certainly don't conform to their role as per the dictates of Varna system as well.

While sociologists display these weaknesses in dealing with the caste system, ethnographers on the other hand tried to side-line the entire problem of classification by simply sticking to on ground observations and fieldwork. Thereby failing to create a theory of caste concurrent with the study of ethnography. Ethnographers also seem to hold the inexplicably bizarre view, one that smacks of orientalism, that caste is somehow a creation of colonialism. They lay emphasis on the acceptance of Manu Samhita as the definitive Hindu legal code by the British and thereby ignoring the Myriad systems of legislation and caste formation that existed in pre-British India. It is indeed surprising to note that these scholars are prepared to ignore the vast body of Indian religious texts which clearly mention the caste system but they cannot ignore merely a hundred and fifty years old British legislations based upon an imperfect understanding of their colony's social system. In their defense it might be said, the Westerners including the British were the first group of people to actually create a coherent classificatory scheme encompassing the whole of Indian Hindu society. For this reason, the Westerners needed an accessible framework of the caste system which was not comparable to anything they saw in the European society.

A Few Discarded Theories of Caste

A lot of the early attempts at theorizing the caste system is now considered to be invalid or inadequate. Nevertheless, a study of these theories presents the reader with an opportunity to observe how the understanding of the caste system has evolved in the Western mind. The first of these theories or assumptions was that caste is linked with race. Early ethnographers of British India, who employed pseudo-scientific methods to determine the superiority or inferiority of a particular race (race was a highly ambiguous concept. Modern science has proven that facial features or colour of skin cannot determine race). This theory was popular even among a section of Indians because accepting this theory meant that the upper castes of India belonged to the superior Aryan race, much like their colonial masters.

A second erroneous concept was that caste is fundamentally related to occupation. As has been discussed before there can be many occupational groups under the same caste and they are identified as Jatis. While it is true that certain occupations seem to be practiced by certain castes only, but the majority of members of most castes and even Jatis do not perform their ritually ordained professions. For example- the Kumhar caste of Bihar traditionally employed as potters have largely abandoned their ancestral profession and now rely mostly on agriculture to subsist (Freed 1963). A third problematic concept is that caste is all about dominance and exploitation and the concepts of purity and pollution are simply 'ideological obfuscations' p 31 to hide the true nature of economic and political exploitation. However, this does not explain why Brahmins seldom enjoy economic powers even in societies where they are ritually dominant. The Marxian understanding of the power dynamics existing in the caste system is therefore grossly inadequate.

Another theory regarding caste advanced by E.R. Leach (Leach 1965). He argued that in contemporary India no real competitions exist among the castes anymore as industrialization and urbanization have broken the barriers of purity and pollution which legitimized the position of the upper castes in the first place. All evidence points to the contrary. The tradition of hypergamy is still prevalent in North India, the practice of acquiring false genealogies and changing of ones name to hide ones Jati based surname is still so common that it points to a different social reality.

By far the most accepted view of caste has been advanced by the French sociologists Lois Dumont in his seminal Homo Hierarchicas (Dumont 1980). Dumont understood the caste system not as a form of stratification but as kind of inequality that is preserved over generations by hereditary groups of Hindus. It is a system of ideas and values but also a formal and rational system. He based his observations on the twin oppositions at the heart of the caste system. These are the opposition between purity and pollution and the opposition between ritual status and regular power. Dumont sees the entire gamut of rituals of Hindus as one which is directed towards creating 'pure' ritual spaces and ritual times (ibid). A ritually pure space is a consecrated place which can be a temple or even someone's house, provided the correct rituals for the purification of the said place has been performed. The Hindu deities are considered to accept the offerings and sacrifices in such sanctified

places. It naturally follows that a member of a so-called impure caste will jeopardize the sanctity of this place and therefore his ritual status is considered as low. The concept of a sacred time is also interesting because only certain times of the day or the month is considered conducive for certain rituals which is also another attempt at separating the sacred and pure form the profane or impure. The fact that sometimes lesser castes perform priestly duties does not signify a breakage of the ritual barrier as these lower caste priests never perform such duties for people who are higher in the caste hierarchy. The case of Mahabrahmans or Pandas prove that upper castes and especially Brahmans generally despise those Brahmans who have made worship their profession something clearly forbidden in Manusmriti.

Dumont's second opposition as advanced in his theory of caste is one between secular and ritual power but this hardly ever took any serious shape in India (ibid). Although Brahminical fantasies of controlling the marshal Kshatriya are often reflected in the puranas and epics- such as the story of Parasuraman eradicating all Kshatriyas twenty-one times or the extreme obeisance paid to their gurus by mighty kings. In reality however, the priesthood almost always submitted to the crown. When such clashes between the two actually took place, such as during Ballal Sen's rule in Bengal or during Shivaji's coronation, the kings replaced the entire local structure of Brahmins rather than submitting to their whims. Thus, Quigley follows an idea originally advanced by Hocart in 1950, who argues that the king and the nobility were always at the centre of the caste system and not the Brahmin priest (Quigley 1994). In fact, he says that the principal function of the priest was to take pollution away from king and nobility through performance of rituals, for example, the ritual of bathing in Ganges water or offering blood sacrifices, all ordained by such priests, were tools to make the king free of his past sins and a thinly disguised attempt to enable him to continue a life of plenty. Here also one can observe a western scholar's inability to understand the all-pervading system of 'Dharma' – understood as universal duty. All those who professed to follow the Sanatan Dharma understood that they had a duty to perform including the king, one who's primary duty was to perform pujas, give alms and respect the brahmins. It can be argued that his very legitimacy depended on it. Despite these shortcomings, Quigley's analysis of Dumont is important in approaching a theory of caste (ibid).

Fitting Bauls and Matuas in the scheme of Little Tradition and Great Tradition

Little tradition and great tradition are both iterations of the kind of religiosity observed by a typical non-industrial society. Great tradition is the whole body of religious, ritualistic and social practices that is directly supported by one of the major religions of that society. For example, in the case of Hinduism performance of fire sacrifice is an example of great tradition as is the worship of the holy trinity of Hinduism. Little tradition on the other hand is a continuation of those ancient and often animistic rituals and deities whose worshippers have accepted the new major religion but managed to assimilate their own beliefs and deities into the larger rubric of the great tradition. It is curious to observe that in almost all south and southeast Asian cultures, the pantheon of gods and spirits are often imagined in a very hierarchical and bureaucratic manner as such the Gods of the great tradition often hold a kind of centralized power over the other smaller and local deities who happen to perform more imminent and local tasks. Scott (Scott 1977) explains this as a division of labor between the gods where the great tradition gods are tasked with the creation and continuation of the cosmic order while the little tradition gods perform acts of everyday exigencies of their followers. For example, while Brahma or Vishnu creates and sustain the cosmic order in Hinduism, a local deity such as Sitala protect the populace from infectious diseases and also protects the children. In Burma, Nats or spirits perform similar tasks within the great tradition of Theravada Buddhism. But the true significance of the little tradition lies in the symbolic reversal of the dominant spiritual and temporal order. It may also be understood as a deliberate profanation of the normative boundaries that the former attempts to implement on the latter. Example of this attitude can be seen in the various Krishna cults of India where the particular form of Krishna being worshipped is portrayed as defeating, subverting and ridiculing some dominant Vedic or Puranic deity like Indra or Brahma. The story of Giri Govardhana is a good example of this where Krishna casually overcomes the attempts of Indra to harass his people.

Little tradition is found usually is peasant communities and the strength and distinctiveness of such tradition is usually concomitant with the social, economic and political distinctiveness of that community. The way the peasants accept the great tradition is also indicative of how much they are prepared to accept the incursions of a centralized and

bureaucratic state machinery into their own village society. Throughout Southeast Asia a pattern can be observed where the peasants follow a type of localism where they wish to minimize interaction with state officials to safeguard their traditional interest in common land, forest, water. They might be prepared to pay tax on land held by local landlords but they fiercely resist attempts to impose taxes on resources traditionally considered to be common. Scott notes that even national politics comes in a very localized form to such villages. The village headman, elected through a modern system, is expected to be the mediator and buffer between the village society and the state. Instead of adhering to state laws, the headman is expected to lie and bribe for his villagers (Miller 1966).

The political autonomy of the village, similar to the religious autonomy of the local cults and traditions prevent the political incursions of political outside to an extent that national level political parties are reduced to a particular person's party who has some link with that village. It is also interesting to note that the villagers make a clear moral distinction between insiders and outsiders. Therefore, all charities are reserved for the insiders only. Outsiders may be shown respect according to their status but they are never extended the same level of mutual help which a local enjoys. Gourou (Chesneaux 1958) gave an account of a North Vietnamese village in which during a famine peasants distributed the meager food grains so that everyone went hungry but nobody died. However, since their charity was limited to their village only, other villages were hard hit by the famine. Thus, one can observe the moral economy of subsistence rights as exercised in the villages since the little tradition cults and sects are also localised they often become the basis for the kind of mutual charity described above. The stronger the feeling of sectarianism the more isolated that community will be in terms of their political and economic preferences. This brings us to the possibility of a radical, dissenting peasant group operating within the framework of a sect. Here also it becomes plain that the peasants cannot really absorb or react to an all-encompassing idea like nationalism or Marxist revolution. National issues are not relevant for them. That doesn't mean that they cannot act radically or with other radical elements. When radicalism and violence is seen at a national level (for example during a rebellion or revolution) that implies a change in the great tradition itself and it often becomes part of normal politics. However, at the level of the little tradition that radicalism might be limited to recovery of land and securing some special advantages, may be even punishing a few officials.

Therefore, when one says that a sect or a cult is dissenting against a major religion, we need to remember that despite the claims pressed by the educated and numerically small part of the sect the majority of members may be only protesting against a particular demeaning or dehumanizing ritual or practice that they encounter locally. Therefore, one needs to be very skeptical when the dissent of the little tradition is incorporated within the broader theoretical framework of political dissent.

According to James C. Scott (Scott 1977), the finer forms of religion which constitute the great tradition are ephemeral in nature while more common forms of religiosity such as magic or ritual worship may outlast the large and established religions. Therefore, in order to survive great traditions also depend on incorporating the beliefs and practices of the little tradition. Therefore, the relationship between the two is a dynamic one. Not only the rituals and practices but also modes of economic life may become intertwined between the two. For example- adherence of a little tradition usually live in a small village society, are subsistence farmers or wage earners and highly risk averse in their economic activities. However, when they become connected to the larger financial networks of upper caste traders and money lenders which the trade tradition offers their financial autonomy might become jeopardized. The relationship between great and little tradition encompasses the synthesis of many such dichotomies. Another example of this is a confluence of elite and non-elite belief-systems. The belief system of the elite tends to be more general in nature and the demands from that system are usually long-term and non-temporal. However, mass belief systems are much more reality oriented and short-tern in nature. Therefore, in a mixed belief system, the pantheon of deities much incorporate gods and goddess who perform both short and long-term miracles.

No matter how powerful the great tradition is, the followers of little tradition often play a dual role when it comes to accepting the dictates of the great tradition. In this context, Scott (Scott 1977) presents the concept of ‘infra politics’ to describe how the little tradition often attempts to retain its autonomy by clandestinely ridiculing the former. In fact, in the South Asian social systems the relation between the two traditions is often one of patronage. In this relation, the elite are happy if the masses pay them due respect and observe some of the major festivals and rituals which signals their formal acceptance of the great tradition. They

are not interested in the local rituals or worship that can be conducted by the masses themselves and which does not affect their social or financial standing. In fact, the elite may project this act of non-interference as a type of privilege which is extended to the masses. To take a Bengali example of this, during the festival of Charak (a summer festival where shocking acts of physical penance is performed to satisfy the gods and to gain magic powers) no Brahmin priest is needed to perform the austerities and worship. In fact, they are actively discouraged to participate in these events. The festival involves a month-long period of mendicancy and celibacy for non-brahmin men who are accorded the status of high castes during that period. Thereby, the Brahminical leaders instill an understanding in the mind of the lower castes that if they live a pious life, they can be accorded a high caste status. The cleverness of the Brahmin leaders in distancing themselves from the typical lower caste or aboriginal festivities and worship is evident as most of these festivals are performed in order to have good rain or good crops. The Shamanistic gurus who perform these rituals often risk their status if these prayers are not answered.

The elite needs to maintain a fine balance between subordination and mollification of the peasantry. The little tradition tolerates and reciprocates the great tradition as long as a particular moral limit is not crossed. Breaking the self-respect of the little tradition will have political consequences. One of the major problems with great traditions is that it sets such norms of conduct for religious activities which cannot be followed by the lower castes, i.e., the followers of the little tradition, except bringing humiliation for themselves. For example- in certain south Indian temples, there is still the illegal tradition of making the lower caste devotees roll around on the half-eaten or empty plates of the temple priests.

Thus, it appears that the simultaneous existence of little and great traditions signifies a more or less stable peasant society where the elite and the commoner co-habit the cultural sphere adhering to certain set boundaries. But when one attempts to locate the Matuas within the framework of Great and Little Tradition, it appears that they, at least in their formative phase, didn't accept the great tradition even superficially. Their very emergence was on the basis of a complete break with the Great Tradition. Harichand Thakur was vehemently against both Brahmins and Vaishnavas and declared himself as a non-believer (Abishwashi) in the Vedic and Brahminical rituals. He was also opposed to idol worship, a sentiment

which still resonates among a section of educated Matuas who dislike the celebration of Durga Puja at the Orakandi house of the Harichand Thakur family which was started by the grandson of Harichnad Thakur. It is a different scenario with the Bauls though. Since Hindu Bauls don't claim a complete break from Vaishnavism and through the lineage of Nityananda and his son Virvadra, claim to continue the 'original' stream of vaishnavism as intended by Sri Chaitnaya, they do fall into the category of Little Tradition with Orthodox Vaishnavism being the 'Great' brother. However, Bauls in Bengal are an extremely varied group, there are many Muslim disciples of Hindu Baul gurus and Muslims Baul gurus with Hindu disciples. The Muslims Bauls certainly defy their great tradition completely. The same is true for the Muslim fakirs as well. It is for this reason that instances of persecution are much more common among the Muslim adherents of the Sahajiya way than their Hindu counterparts. It may be that the complete dissociation of the Matuas from the great tradition have engendered in them more radical tendencies and the will to unite and fight for their rights which have resulted in their belated inclusion in the mainstream of the country's politics. Although the non-inclusion of Bauls in the structures of social and political power is a complex phenomenon with many factors responsible, one of the primary factors happen to be that Bauls were more accommodative of the great tradition and therefore, struggled to maintain their separate identity as a group, becoming a non-entity in the political scene in the process.

Chapter Two

The Journey from Vaishnava to Sahajiya: The Spiritual Trajectory of the Baul

Edward C Dimock is one of the foremost scholars on the Bauls who has successfully shown the path of evolution from Gaudiya to Sahajiya Vaishnavism. According to him, the sanctified Vaishnava texts of the six Goswamis of Vrindavan including those of Rup and Jeev Goswami express the superiority of a lover's longing or 'Bihara' as a purest and highest form of love. This is the kind of love that a devotee must have towards his lord and this is the type of love that the Gopis of Vrindavan had for Krishna. Dimock refers to Bhagavata Purana (Dimock 1989) to establish the superiority of 'Parakiya love' that is, the love of a woman other than one's wife which is superior to 'Swakiya love' which is a love experienced from one's wife. According to Bhagavata Purana, there is no longing in 'Swakiya love', neither is there any danger of infamy. Since these qualities are present in 'Parakiya love', it is considered a more potent way of realizing the supremely joyful union of a devotee with the Lord himself. Gaudiya Vaishnavism maintains that the best Sadhak or devotee is one who is not seeking moksha or absolute oneness with God but one who is able to enjoy the state or moment of union with God indefinitely. If one accepts this controversial analysis of oneness with God, then a union of flesh between two unrelated people may also seem as a natural way to reach God and this is the first stage of Gaudiya Vaishnavism's transition into the Sahajiya.

However, attaining God through such a union is only possible when the man or something inside the man is accepted a divine. This acceptance of man's divinity, irrespective of caste or creed is the second building block of the Sahajiya theory. The Sahajiya claims that divine joy is not something external, it is not a quest to realize an external truth through Yogic practices or seeking an external power through penance. Divinity or at least as far as it can be comprehended by mortals is the simultaneous physical and mental union of the Sadhaka and his companion- who are themselves made in the image of Krishna and Radha.

The Vaishnava poets who expressed these principles through their poetry are unique in the study of religions because they themselves actively take part in the religious experience or

situation that they create through their poetry. For example: when Krishna Das kabiraj or Vrisndavan Das describes a particularly emotionally charged moment of Chaitanya's life, they often end that section mentioning themselves as unworthy of receiving such divine guidance and lamenting about it. This metaphysical participation and immediacy of the writer to the experiences and emotions of his subjects is called Bhava which is a crucial concept in the understanding of Bhakti. Dimock describes that among the different Bhavas or stages of mind, the 'Madhuriya' or 'Sringara' Bhava is the highest stage where the worshiper identifies himself as the lover of Krishna, either in the form of a Vrindavan milkmaid or Gopi or as Radha herself (Dimock 1989).

Because of a fusion of tantrik Buddhism and hindu rituals, it is hard to identify the beginning of Sahajiya practices in Bengal. However, Rama Kanta Chakrabarty (Chakrabarty 1996) in his 'Bange Vasihnav Dharma', mentions that Ballal Sen refers to Bhagawata Purana in his 'Dan Sagar' (Ibid), thereby proving the influence of this Vaishnava text in 11th century Bengal. Chakrabarty also mentions a 12th century tablet from Paharpur of East Bengal where Krishna is mentioned along with the Gopis. Another ancient tablet from Tripura, the date of which cannot be fully ascertained, mentions 'Sahaja Dharma'. Despite these sporadic findings, it is certain that Krishna worship and especially veneration of his Vrindavan-Lila was not a very popular mode of worship.

Jayadeva, the court poet of Lakshman Sen was the first celebrated poet to clearly imbibe Krishna and Radha with deeply human elements. The essentially Gaudiya element of Biraha is beautifully and sensually described in his Geeta Gobinda. His contemporary Gobardhan Acharya composed 700 poems focussing on the erotic leela of Krishna and Radha (ibid). Despite Jayadeva's poems, it is not certain whether he was a Viashnava in the contemporary sense and there is evidence of his veneration of Shiva. Vidyapati, a contemporary of Sri Chaitanya, was a confirmed Vaishnava according to Sukumar Sen (ibid). He wrote highly erotic poems concerning Radha and Krishna which may be considered radical even in contemporary times. What connected all these poets was a common theme of Bhakti or personal devotion free from the encumbrance of rituals.

Sri Krishna Kirtan by Badu Chandidas is another example of Vaishnava poetry which is even closer to the Sahajiya principles. He was a worshipper of Basuli, a Buddhist tantrik Goddess whom he incorporated freely in his description of Vrindavan Leela where Krishna is a rude, imposing and exacting village boy tormenting Radha and afterwards leaving her forever. Badu Chandidas can act as a bridge in understanding the development of Vaishnava sahajiya from pre-Chaitanya Vaishnavism and Buddhist tantra (Mandal 2001).

In fact, tantric practices were so widespread and openly practiced in Bengal during Chaitanya's time, that it seems inevitable that an amalgamation of tantra and Vaishnavism would eventually appear. Krishnananda Agambagish was a contemporary of Chaitanya in Nabadweep who wrote the famous 'Brihad Tantrasara' and established Kali worship as an agreeable form of devotion for common men. Another interesting fact to note was that the Brahmins did not oppose the emergence of these tantric practices and development of new cults of Basuli, Dharma etc. Rather, they actively encouraged these cults and incorporated them in the emerging neo-smriti tradition written by conservative Brahmins like Jimut Bahana and Raghunandana, codifying an exhaustive set of rituals and religious laws for Hindus (Rocher 2012). The emphasis in these texts by Brahmin leaders was on the artificial division of Bengali society into only two castes of Brahmin and Sudra. Such a division was surprising because the Kayastas were also relegated to the status of Sudras, despite Kayastas already attaining social status and political power as employees of the state. It is not hard to imagine that such a social milieu was ideal ground for a truly gifted preacher like Chaitanya who eschewed Sanskrit smriti traditions and its associated body of rituals or Kriya kanda and advocated an attractive and extremely simple way to salvation available to all castes.

Despite the wave of Bhakti or devotion that washed over the people of Bengal and entire Eastern India in the wave of Chaitanya's movement, ritualism and dominance of Brahmins did not disappear. In fact, one can observe that in less than 100 years after Chaitanya's demise, Gaudiya Vaishnavism incorporated all the trappings of the Brahminical, smriti dependent ritualism that he rallied against. This ideological departure can be interpreted as a rejection of Chaitanya's teachings itself. Gaudiya Vaishnavism, with Brindavan as its ideological center, may be considered as an entirely new religious philosophy, created by

the Goswamis of Vrindavan. Such an assessment however will prove to be erroneous. It is mentioned by both Krishna Das Kabiraj, the author of 'Chaitanya Charitamrita' and Vrindaban Das, author of 'Chaitanya Bhagavat', that the Mahaprabhu during his last days, expressly ordered Rup and Sanatan Goswami to go to Vrindavan and establish a theoretical basis of the Chaitanya movement. According to Rama Kanta Chakrabarty, it was a result of Chaitanya's experience in Nabadweep during the early years of his movement when his simple message of Bhakti did not attract the teachers and philosophers of Nabadweep. In fact, they eventually formed a group or 'Samabay' against Chaitanya. Facing their relentless resistance, he ultimately had to leave Nabadweep for Neelachal. (Chakrabarty 1996)

It is therefore no wonder that the writings of the Vrindavan Goswamis included considerable amounts of erotic poetry based on the Vrindavan leela of Krishna existing side by side with their Bhagawat based philosophical doctrines. 'Ujjalanilamani' of Rup Goswami and Hari Bhaktivilas by Gopal Bhatta are almost entirely collections of such erotic poems, although the sensuality of these poems is more subtle compared to the later Sahajiya texts (ibid). The Vrindavan Goswamis took pains to prove that such leela had a divine purpose and not to be imitated by men of flesh and blood. Two other major companions of Chaitanya, Nityananda and Adwaita Acharya both were tasked with spreading the message of love for Krishna to the common people of Bengal. It is clear therefore, that Chaitanya himself wished to form two distinct but interrelated streams of his Bhakti movement- One for the commoners and another for the learned. Adwaita settled in Santipur of Nadia and preached Chaitanya's message in a vigorous but conservative way, not destabilizing the existing caste order and not including any socially controversial religious practices. Nityananda on the other hand, went to remote villages all over southern and eastern Bengal to spread Vaishnavism. He enthusiastically accepted Sudra followers. His son Virabhadra and wife Jahnaba devi even accepted Buddhist monks as followers (Dimock 1963). It is not certain whether Nityananda followed any practices which can be called as Sahajiya but it is certain that his son Virabhadra practiced tantra. A controversial figure during his time, he is considered to be the pioneer of Vaishnava Sahajiya Sadhana.

Despite doctrinal differences, the heirs and followers of both Adwaita and Nityananda were not at odds. There is evidence of close cooperation between the two groups in the face of strong resistance from Smarta Brahmin leaders and the popular Sufis. Vrindavan Goswamis

also felt the need for Vaishnava unity. Kheturi Utsav which began between 1610 and 1620 was an important example of such unity where all three groups came together to help in the spread of Vaishnavism in North Bengal (Chakrabarty 1996).

Rama Kanta Chakrabarty mentions that there were some important Vaishnava leaders who were not in favour of such cooperation. They believed that mixing with the Vrindavan group would eventually lead the Vaishnavas away from the Bhakti as preached by Chaitanya and lead to mindless observance of daily duties and rituals. It is a fact that some of the early Vaishnava gurus already started the practice of not accepting lower caste followers. They also started donning the diacritical marks of the upper caste such as the sacred thread. Therefore gurus like Churadharai, Madhav, Kapindri, Bishnudas, Basudeb and Jayagopal Das decided to forsake the 'official' stream of Vaishnavism as it was emerging in Bengal. An example of the clash of ideology that was occurring between the 'mainstream' Vaishnava leaders and these dissenters (many of whom were Shudras) can be found in Virabhadra's excommunication of Jayagopal Das as he was ordaining Brahmin followers despite being a Shudra. Virabhadra expressly forbade his followers to have any interactions with Jayagopal. (Sen 2000).

These deviant gurus did not consider the texts of the six Vrindavan Goswamis and their followers as canonical. Instead, they focused on the writings of Narahari Sarkar (the founder of the clearly Sahajiya 'Gournagaribad'). They also focused on those parts of Chaitanya Charitamrita where the close relation of Chaitanya with Ramananda Roy (the famous Sadhaka of Neelachal who used young women as a test of his chastity) is mentioned and those parts of the Charitamrita and Bhagavat where it is mentioned that Chaitanya and his principal followers themselves followed 'Nayika Sadhana'. (Chakrabarty 1996)
Badu Chandidas's Sri Krishna Kirtan is also a clearly Sahajiya text which linguists have dated to early medieval era which was venerated by these dissenters. Similar trends of corporeal Sahajiya practices can be seen among the followers of Gadadhar pandit, as mentioned in the 'Prem Bilas' of Nityananda Das. (Ibid)

A crucial difference between the works of the Vrindavan Goswamis and the later gurus was that the earlier wrote poetry to inspire devotion. Doctrine and poetry were clearly

differentiated. The latter however, wrote poetry as a vehicle for conveying secret practices or 'Guhya Sadhana'. Premananda, a practitioner of such secret methods, was chastised by his own guru for publicly writing about such practices. Therefore, it is not hard to imagine that by the middle of 17th century, the transition from Vaishnava Bhakti movement to Vaishnava Sahajiya was complete for a section of Vaishnavas. Since they were eschewed by both the doctrinaire Brindavan Vaishnavas and the more lenient clan of Nityananda, Sahajiya Vaishnavas eventually moved further away from the mainstream of Vaishnava religion, slowly developing their own unique rituals and practices (Urban 1993). Since the development of such practices differed locally depending on the teachings of a particular guru or socio-political realities of a particular area, the emergence of the numerous Sahajiya sects including that of Baul started to take shape.

Two important points need to be made at this juncture. Firstly, the principal reason behind the excommunication of Sahajiya Vaishnavas had less to do with their doctrine and practices and more with their egalitarian stance regarding caste. The stated reason for Birabhadras excommunication of Jayagopal was not his beliefs but his status as a Sudra guru of Brahmins. Although Raghunath Das Goswami of Vrindavan, one of the celebrated six Goswamis was a Sudra and some of the later Goswamis of Bengal were Kayastas, they accepted the doctrine of Brahmincal superiority and some even started donning the thread imitating the Brahmins. The Sahajiyas, barring a few exceptions such as Nrisingha, made no such compromises and therefore, proved to be too radical (Chakrabarty 1996). The practice of using women ostensibly for sadhana was extremely common for Vaishnava gurus right up to the 19th century (Kaliprasanna Singha, Hutum pachar Naksha). Even using women for the guru's own satisfaction or seva was a socially acceptable luxury. Therefore, the use of women in sadhana was not a radical point of departure for the Sahajiyas.

When viewed from a broader Indian perspective, the Sahajiya practice of considering bodily pleasure and sexual union to be a path for attaining the ultimate pleasure of unity with the godhead was also acceptable as sexual rites and rituals easily intermingled with the Indian religion, as evident from the vivacious temple reliefs of Khajuraho and Konark and the cave paintings of Ajanta. The real reasons behind the Sahajiya's parting of ways were centered around the question of caste and the rejection of Brahminical smarta

ritualism. It is probably this distance from Hinduism and a will to clandestinely rebel against the dictates of mainstream Vaishnavism which led to eventual adoption of such tantric practices such as partaking of feces etc. Although in contemporary era it is the Bauls who are principally known for these practices but several other tantric sects encourage such practices in order to rid a follower from all material misconceptions about the body. The Aghoris, for example, take this idea to an extreme point where they require their disciples to partake human flesh as a last and final breaking of social and religious taboo (Ray 2016).

A few literary evidences of the transition from Vaishnava to Sahajiya

Sri Chaitanya Bhagavatam written by Nrishingha in 1665 mentions in detail some hitherto unheard of 'parakiya rati' acts by Chaitanya himself. He is described as 'rati sastra bichakshan' or one experienced in the art of pleasure. According to Nrishingha he could form 'kaya byuha' which probably means the ability to create many mirror images of himself and to perform 'rati leela' with many nayikas. While this is most likely an attempt by the poet to draw a parallel between Krishna's Vrindavan leela and Chaitanya's Nabadweep leela, his book provides important information about the tantric turn of a section of Vaishnavas. Nrishingha studied tantric texts like 'Kramadipika', 'Tantrasara', 'Jamal' and 'Mantrachuramani' and attempted to establish a connection between Tantrik practices which were not only popular but patronized by many powerful Jamindars. (Chakrabarty 1996). 'Radhatantram' was another text from this period which clearly showed Radha as a Tantrik 'Nayika'.

'Bangshishiksha' was written by Premdasa or Purushottam Mishra, a learned Brahmin pandit with the title of 'Sidhhanta Bagish' who was a guru in the tradition of Baghnapara Vaishnavas, who were followers of Nityananda and especially, his wife Jahnava Devi. However, Premadasa's writings bear no connection with the more conservative teachings of Jahnava Devi, whose teachings were compiled in another book named 'Muralibilasa' written by Rajballav Goswami. (ibid) Bangshishiksha introduces a new idea of Chaitanya's divinity named 'Rasarajtatwa'. This has clear indications of being a Sahajiya doctrine as it advocates the classical Sahajiya way of prolonging sexual union in order to reach a

transcendental state of pleasure which is both part of and above the physical union of man and woman. According to the doctrine, this pleasure reveals the true nature of the divine.

The clearest expressions of Sahajiya characteristics by a Guru who still identified himself primarily as Vaishnava can be found in the 'Vivarta Vilasa' by Akinchan Dasa. His guru was Raghunatha who was excommunicated from mainstream Vaishnavism due to his Sahajiya tendencies. (Hayes 2000) By the time Vivarta Vilasa was written, the free spirit of love and rebellion in Chaitanya's movement transformed to such a degree that Akinchan Dasa even considered the initiation ceremony of a disciple by a Guru (usually by reciting a special Mantra or Bij in the ear of the disciple) as akin to a sexual union (ibid).

How Bauls acquired their 'unique' mode of Dehasadhana, i.e. 'Charchandra' use and other socially reprehensible practices

Shaiva Sadhana or worshipping Lord Shiva was one of the popular five types of cults in medieval Bengal, known as 'Panchaupasana'. The Bhakti movement of Chaitanya dislodged these cults. Kapalik and Aghoris of the Shaiva tradition are radical and heterodox worshipers who use many profane objects in their sadhana to prove the futility of man-made ideas of sacred and profane as well to prove the larger Shankarite view of the entire world being an illusion or 'Maya' where one object is not really different from the other even if one is considered pure and another most impure. Shaiva 'Hangshas' and 'Paramhangshas', i.e. gurus who have advanced far in the path of enlightenment also have a tradition of using bodily waste products which must have influenced the early Bauls. (Jha 1999)

According to Jha, the tradition of 'Rasasadhana' or use of alchemy involving chemicals and bodily products is of ancient Indian origin. The Jainas first thought of the soul in terms of a bodily object and shifted focus away from the older Hindu view of the body as only a temporary vessel for the passing soul. The Nath yogis were practitioners of bodily alchemy in a quest for gaining special powers and sometimes, immortality. They made extensive use of Mercury and its many by-products and called it 'Rasa'. During the seventh century, Budhhist teacher Nagarjuna or Vasistha attempted for many years to achieve immortality

through alchemy in a series of 'experiments' carried out in 'Pundrabardhan', situate in modern day Bengal. Nagarjuna apparently learned the process successfully and taught it to Buddhist 'Sidhhas' who were successful Tantriks. This knowledge then, apparently, flowed through the generations of Sidhha gurus (ibid).

While discussing the intricacies of 'Rasasadhana', it is important to note that in most Tantrik Buddhist and Nath texts, semen has also been mentioned as Rasa. The importance of semen as part of the tantrik anatomy of the body is also supported by the frequent references to 'Vajra' and the 'Vajra Nari'. Vajra is another name for semen in these texts. This importance grew to such an extent that for later Tantrik sadhakas, control over the 'Vajra' was considered a test of their greatness. Many styles of Yoga or 'Mudra' such as the 'Vajroli Mudra' apparently helped a sadhaka in such control. Considering the Nath, Budhhist and Tantrik inspirations of the Baul, Jha has opined that the name Baul itself is derived from 'Bajrakul', i.e. those who worship Bajra or Semen (ibid).

Many of the important Sahajiya Vaishnava gurus such as Lochan Das and Narottam Das wrote smaller and more intimate Sahajiya texts along with their longer works and named these texts 'Karcha'. These texts quite clearly mention the importance of semen and other bodily objects for Sadhana (ibid.)

Mukunda Das, another important Sahajiya Vaishnava with a large hereditary following among the Bauls of Nadia and Murshidabad created a link between the worship of 'Panchatatwa' , i.e. the five basic elements of all creation and the five basic elements of the human body . These elements are semen, blood, urine, feces and air (breathing air). According to this materialistic interpretation of divinity, the worship of these bodily objects can give someone the ability to 'taste' or realise the moment of unity of the five elements. This unity may be called God (ibid).

Mani Mohan Bose in his 'Post Chaitanya Sahajiya Cult of Bengal'_has given one of the earliest reports about the emergence of Sahajiya practices in India and in Bengal (Bose 1930). However, his attempt to find roots of the Sahajiya practices in the Linga worship in the Rigvedic era and his reference to the Atharva Veda to prove that Parakiya Unions

between men and women for the purpose of a joint transcendental afterlife is not entirely feasible. (ibid) He also mentions that in the Chandogya Upanishada, there is the concept of Bamadeva Samana which was acknowledged by the Adi Sankaracharya as an exposition of how a Sadhak can take many women as a means to reach his goal (ibid).The Katha Vathhu, a Buddhist work predating Christ, mentions the process of Ekadhippayo, which means th union of men and women who do not merely have passion but a compassion for each other's search for God. This clearly resembles the central tenet of the Sahajiya. The same text also mentions that such practices were encouraged in the some Viahars situated in the Uttarapathaka or the North West frontier regions of India. However, Madhyama Nikaya, another early Buddhist text sternly mentions that Buddha himself said that all those Brahmanas and Shramans who practices sexual intercourse and other forms of sensuality in the name of religion are walking on the wrong path (ibid). Sen, not surprisingly, writes in a manner fitting a colonial 'sahib' and freely speaks of how 'primitive races' all over the world have worshipped the phallus and other objects and acts associated with sexuality because they were yet to receive the light of Christianity. He goes so far as to speak in the same breath of the customs of pacific islanders observed by Captain Cook and religious practices in Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, Greece and India and paints all those civilizations as immature ones which showed a particular phase of the development of 'Human Mind' (ibid).

He begins from the concept that love is of supreme value to the Gods and for realization of the true nature of God. He mentions, analyzing texts like Ujjalanilamani written by Rup Goswami and also from Chaitanya Caritamrita where it is mentioned that Sri Krishna took birth as Sri Chaitanya because he wanted to feel the power of love as was enshrined in Radha. This is a central tenet of Gaudiya Vaishanvism that Sri Chaitanya was an incarnation of Krishna bearing all the qualities of love found in Radha in Vashnava texts. But the Vaishnavas consider that love is of two types. They consider love for God to be pure love, a love without selfish interests. That is called 'Prem'. However, when such selfish interests permeate love, it becomes 'Kama', something which is reviled in all Vaishnava texts as well as by the later Sahajiyas (Bose 1930). The author quotes extensively from Plato's banquete where Socartes is shown to be learning about the true meaning of love from Diotima, a female philosopher. Diotima teaches him that no knowledge of love is sufficient unless one

actually practices it. The author finds similarities between this teaching and the teachings of Chandidas and other Sahjiya writers who have ardently advocated the position of a female companion in sadhana for the full realization of the path of love (ibid). This female companion can't be the wife of a person as according to the vaishanva texts, it is only through a union with another woman or women that a sadhak can achieve the mental and spiritual state that Sri Krishna and Sri Radha or the other gopis have reportedly achieved. Those relations were all parakiya or extramarital love, therefore the argument for parakiya rati (love both physical and spiritual). The author however, mentions that in many Vaishava as well as Tantra texts, this parakiya sadhana or worship with help of a woman other than the wife or legal companion is advised to be performed in the mind only. Rasasastrasara mentions that such parakiya unions are to be enjoyed frequently but only in mind so as not to be corrupted by the desires of flesh (ibid). The Vaishnava texts advocating such sadhana freely acknowledges their debt to earlier Tantra texts and methods and both these ways of worship have a lot in common not only in method but also in philosophy and language (ibid). The early Sahajiya ideas have also borrowed heavily from the tantric ideas of metaphysical anatomy in the form of Chakras and Lotuses within the human body and the ways of meditation and other physical processes through which these chakras and lotuses can be controlled to elevate a person to a special spiritual state. Another crucial tenet of the Sahajiya way, which can be termed as the central tenet of that 'Marga' is also borrowed from the idea of 'Bamachara' of Tantra. Bamachara is a way of worship where the worshippers assume that he is the consort of his desired deity. In other words, the worshipper, who is always male, assumes the physical characteristics of a woman manifested in his attire, jewellery etc. And in this way he attempts to please his deity as a lover would try to please her beloved. This concept, mentioned in key texts of Tantra like 'Kualarnaba Tantra', 'Ratnasara' and 'Nigurartha Prakasika' has been adopted by Sahajiya writers like Chandidas in his Padabaly (Roy 1983).

There are some key differences between Sahajiya and Tantra ways. Tantra considers women as simply means to an end. The treatment of women in Tantra is mechanical. Tantra is also more concerned with power and therefore women in Tantra are mentioned as Shaktis. In Sahajiya way, women are treated as 'Sakhi' or 'Manjari', meaning a true companion with him the sadhak must build a connection of love. This love must not be borne out of their

physical union and the pleasure thereof but a genuine love for the companion. Only such love can elevate the sadhak to a state where he can realize the divine love of Krishna and his Gopis (Bose 1930).

Nityanand, who was one of the principal followers of Sri Chaitanya, was said to be a Nimat Sampradaya Vaishnava. The Nimats are a sampradaya based in Mathura who were one of the very first Vaishnava orders who started the worship of Radha along with Krishna. They are also one of the first Vaishnava orders whose preferred method of worship is confessing love to Krishna as Sri Radha would have done (Risley 1891). The author claims that such tendencies of Nityanda must have influenced Chaitanya to an extent that he became an astute preacher of the prema of Radha. In fact, one of the principal reasons of Sri Chaitanya's exodus from Nabadwip to Puri was his obsession with this 'Gopibhav' or emotional attachment to Krishna in the form of a Gopi. The contemporary Nayasastra Pandits of Nabadwip as well as the powerful Sakta pundits who lived there could never accept this turn of Chaitanya (Chakrabarty 1996). He is said to have organized and acted in plays where he used to act as the Sakhi of Krishna. Therefore, it will not be a stretch to infer that Chaitanya was in fact, not only a social reformer who accepted people of all caste and religions into the fold of his new Bhakti oriented Vaishnavism but he was also the founder of Sahajiya worship among Vaishnavas. It is no secret that his methods of worship and his general conduct was very unbecoming of a Vaishnava saint and this was a reason of his continued struggles with another principal disciple and luminary, Adwaitya Acharya. It is also a proven fact that Nityananda's son, Birbhadra was the founder of tantric worship among Vaishnavas in Bengal and in the eastern India. Although the Chaitanya Caritramrita says that Nityananda along with his son and one of his three wives, Janhavi, visited Vrindaban and was instrumental in installing the famous 'Six Goswamis' of Vrindaban but his legacy was not really that of a Gaudiya Vaishnava (ibid).

The word 'Sahajiya' has arisen out of the Sanskrit word Sahaja which means something natural or inborn. Since it comes naturally to human beings, therefore it is also the easiest and can't be immoral or improper. At least that is the basic understanding of the word as utilized by those who call themselves Sahajiyas. Sahajiya is generally understood to be a concept beginning from the Buddhist practices of Tantra, Bajra Jana, Mantra Jana or Sahaja

Jana. However, practices similar to Sahajiya have been observed in ancient Hindu texts as well including the Rig Veda. If we consider the idea of 'Dwaita Bhava', i.e. 'the world is created by one supreme being but for the purpose of this creation, that being had to take the form of a divine male and a divine female and out of that divine union, everything was created' (Urban 1993). In Rig Veda's hymn 10-129-5, the germ of this original idea of the Purush and Prakriti can be found. This idea later developed into the worship of the Lingam or the dual worship of the Lingam and the Yoni. However, the majority of the Aryans during the Rig Vedic era did not like such forms of worship. Hence, the worship of the Phallus or 'Shishna Deva' was discouraged. Shishna Devas were even mentioned as opposed to Indra and that Indra defeated them, according to verses of the Rig Veda such as 10-27-19, 10-99-3 etc. (Bhattacharya 1991). However, there is proof that despite such opposition, worship of the fertility powers did not disappear. Atharva Veda mentions many secret practices related to such worship. One particularly interesting practice which comes close to the Vaishnav ideas of Swakiya and Parakiya is found in verses 9-5-27-28 of Atharva Veda where it is mentioned that a woman can take another husband while already having a husband. After that, there are certain procedures mentioned as 'pancadona' which can give that woman a choice to remain with her original husband or to take the new one. But the most striking example of parakiya and other sexual practices in the ancient Indian religion can be found in the Chandogya Upanishada in a section called the 'Bamana Samana'. In this section (Chandogya Upanishada 2:13:1), the phrase 'Na Kanchana Pariharet' has been explained by none other than the Adi Sankaracharya to be a suggestion to engage in sexual union with many women as a way of attaining spiritual heights. He further stated that no woman is to be left behind in such forms of spirituality. Such hints of Sahajiya practices as found in Ancient Hindu texts have taken a much more explicit form in the Buddhist literature. In 'Katha-Vathhu', a pre-Christian era Budhhist text, a practice of 'Ekadhippayo' is mentioned which means sexual union of a Sraman and a female Vikshu (initiated Buddhist monk or nun) for the purpose of attaining a higher level of spirituality, given that they already have some tenderness for each other (Davids 1892). The same text also mentions that the Buddhists of North-Western India, called 'Uttarapathakas' greatly admired this way of worship and it was prevalent among them. Even in a text as old as the 'Majhama Nikaya', it is mentioned that Buddha himself was aware of such practices going

on in the Buddhist Sangh during his time and he warned other vikshus against such practices (Bhattacharya 1991).

The Sahajiya practices of today have also borrowed considerably from the traditions of 'Tantra' existing in Indian since ancient times. The earliest exponents of Tantra in India were the Siddhas who formed a cult around the worship of various mystical powers. The later followers of Tantra enthusiastically endorsed the view that a woman or Prakriti is essential towards spiritual enlightenment of a Sadhaka. Tantra texts such as the 'Visvakosa' mentions that even if a sadhak is devout and performs all the penances required for enlightenment, without union with a Parakiya woman, his efforts would be in vain (Bhattacharya 1996). However, Tantra literature also mentions that such a union need not always be of a physical nature and some texts in fact, expressly state such unions may take place in the mind only. The higher plains of sadhana should involve the sadhaka feeling the pleasure of a physical union in his mind and utilizing that pleasure as a channel to feel the infinite love or power of God. Vaishnava Sahajiya literature has been much influenced by this style of worship which has been interpreted by them a higher plane of devotion or bhakti named Raganuga Bhakti. In Vaishnav literature, the prakriti of Tantra or the woman is mentioned as 'Manjari', 'Sakhi' or by such other names. It is mentioned in early Vaishnav Sahajiya texts like Amritaratnavali and Rasasara that Manjari may only be thought of as a companion to achieve oneness with Krishna (ibid). The early Sahajiya idea was also much influenced by the metaphysical anatomy of the body as envisaged by Tantra. The idea of many 'Chakras' and 'lotuses' upon mythical 'ponds' within the body, the identification of a nervous system for stimulating these Chakras and Lotuses and finally attaining ultimate wisdom or ultimate truth was an idea taken up by the Sahajiya school. Even in the contemporary Sahajiya tradition, these ideas resonate strongly. 'Sri Krishna Kirtan' of Badu Chandidas, which is considered to be one of the most important texts of the Sahajiya sects, is full of praises of these Chakras and their effects on the human body and mind. He describes in details the different 'Naris' or veins in one's body which influence a person's spiritual capacity. In these descriptions, Chandidasa also presents a fantastical idea about human procreation with different type of animals and men taking birth from different type of Naris according their preordained spiritual capacity. (Bose 1930).

Another important aspect of Tantra which influenced Sahajiya Sadhana is the preference for 'Bama' way of Sadhana rather than the regular or the 'Dakshina' way. The Dakshina way implies that the worshipper or Sadhak will assume the position of the divine male and the Prakriti or the woman involved in the worship will assume the form of the divine female (ibid). This kind of worship is actually considered to be following the dictates of the Vedas. As such, this is called 'Vaidhi' Bhakti or worship accepted by the books. As both Tantra and Sahajiya Vaishnavism states, that any form of worship which is not against the dictates of the mainstream books, is called Dakshina worship or the right form of worship which will, unfortunately not yield the ultimate truth or the greatest feeling of oneness with God. Therefore, the Bamacara or worship through the left or a dissenting way was the best path. Bamacara involved the worshippers assuming the form of a woman or the Prakriti, in reality as well as in mind, to worship his desired deity or spirit imagined as a male. Bamacara or Bama Marga has been taken as the backbone of Sahajiya sadhana as well. Many of the Sahajiya sects of India both in early or late medieval times have adopted this form of worship and accepted 'Radhabhav' or the worship of Krishna in the form of his divine consort Radha as ideal (ibid). However, Tantra sects and Sahajiya vasihanva sects also show some marked differences. Tantra is a mechanical way of achieving divine consciousness and women or prakriti are also seen as a means to achieve an end. In Tantra, there is little or no feeling of love between the male and female participants in sadhana. In Sahajiya Vaishnav ideas, love between the male and female participants is the most important aspect of the sadhana because without that emotional connection, their sadhana principally based on realizing the divine love of Radha and Krishna cannot be fulfilled. Tantra also focuses more on the attainment of several powers or Shakti and even in their methods of worship, there is a predominance of the masculinity and power. Sahajiya Vaishnavism puts more emphasis on the feminine and considers the primordial feminine spirit to be the ultimate progenitor or the root cause of creation. Sahajiya sadhana is also distinct from Tantra as it does not advocate use of liquor and meat as requisites for worship (ibid).

Dimock in his book 'Place of the Hidden Moon' has described the importance of Nityananda, one of the principal disciples of Sri Chaitanya, in the creation of the Sahajiya sect within Gaudiya Vaishanvism. Nityananda has been described as an Abadhut, both in the Chaitanya Caritamrita and Chaitanya Bhagabat (Dimock 1989). Abadhut means a

person mad in divine love and one whose immediate actions can't be logically explained by men. But Abadhut may also connote that he was a Shaivaite. Chaitanya biographers and later followers have given Nityananda a place almost equal to that of Chaitanya and modern Chaitanyaite movements like the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) describe him as a form of Balaram , the brother of Krishna who appeared in the Kali Yuga in the form of Nityananda to assist Sri Chaitanya. The importance of Nityananda in the Vaishnava movement lies in the fact that it was he who actually popularized Bhakti-centric Vaishnavism in Bengal mainly through the method of sankirtana or singing the holy name of Krishna and Radha. Nityananda is also crucial to the emergence of the Sahajiya school as one of the basic principles of the Sahajiya school is the absence of Brahminical dominance and accessibility by any caste. Chaitanya deva is himself regarded as a pioneer in spreading the name of Krishna among the people irrespective of their caste and even religion. Two of his principal disciples, Rup and Sanatan were high level employees of the Sultan of Bengal, Hussain Shah. Therefore, irrespective of the caste of their birth, they were considered as untouchables by the elite Hindus and they themselves, according to the evidence of the Chaitanya Caritamrita, considered themselves to be lowly (ibid). Another one of his principal disciples was Jaban Haridas, who was originally a Muslim. Chaitanya also declared that all those who accept the name of Krishna and worship him with bhakti are as good or even better than Brahmins in his eyes and if a Brahmin does not take the name of Krishna, he would be considered as low as a Chandal or untouchable. Despite these egalitarian declarations, the life sketches of Chaitanya dev present contradictory evidence as to his ideas about caste divisions. The same Chaitanya who embraced Muslims and Chandals going against the dictates of the Brahmins agreed to Rup and Sanatana excusing themselves from a religious debate on the ground of their lowly caste status due to mixing with the Muslim rulers. He even allowed for Jaban Haridas to sit outside the circle of his high caste Bhaktas for fear of pollution. Nityananda was thoroughly against such practices and his views on such matters as well as his eccentric lifestyle (one rich in drinking and merrymaking) often put him at loggerheads with another principal disciple of Chaitanya, Adwaita Acharya who was a Brahmin (Chakrabarty 1996). After the untimely death of Chaitanya, the movement he created went in two completely different directions. Disciples like Rup, Sanatan and Raghunath Bhatta focused on building a new seat for Gaudiya Vaishnavism at Vrindavan, the holy place of Sri Krishna's lila or divine play. Important

religious places in Vrindavan associated with the life of Krishna as mentioned in the Puranas were 'discovered' by none other than Sri Chaitanya while on a pilgrimage. Now, Rup, Sanatana, their nephew Jiva Goswami and Raghunath Bhatta established a centre of learning there with the blessing of Adwaita Acharya. Eventually six such Goswamis came to head the school of Vaihnavite philosophy in Vrindavana (ibid). Not only did they write copiously on the nature of God according to vaishnavite philosophy and attempted to prove the unity of the Vedantic God with Krishna, the perfect being, but they also founded some of the principal temples of Vrindavana that one can see today. Surprisingly, the works of this school were almost completely devoid of the earthly vivacity of the religion originally spread by Chaitanya. The highly esoteric and philosophical works of the six Goswamis, all written in Sanskrit, hardly made an impact on the common man of Bengal. Although it can be mentioned that Chaitanya Caritamrita mentions that Sri Chaitanya himself sent Rup and Sanatan to Vrindavan to establish a philosophical base for his religion but Chaitanya himself was never seen to be too keen on establishing a defined religious or social structure. Like many other great religious leaders, he had a natural ability to attract followers but not organizational brilliance. A devout follower might say that perhaps he was above such material considerations. It is important though, that three of the six goswamis were not Brahmins. Rup and Sanatan's case has been mentioned earlier. Another one of the Goswamis was Raghunath Dasa who was a Kayastha from Bengal (a caste considered to be of Sudra origin during that period). However, it can be observed from historical documents that Vrindavan Goswamis found powerful supporters in the form of Rajput Generals of Emperor Akbar, Mansingh and Todormal. In fact, the emperor himself made significant grants to adherents of Rup and Sanatan Goswami at a later period (Chakrabarty 1996). It is not completely clear as to why the Goswamis of Vrindavan drifted away from the teachings of Chaitanya and did not pursue a more people oriented policy including Sankirtan and socio-religious movement like their spiritual master but perhaps such availability of royal patronage explains in part their diminishing need of connection with Nilachal and Bengal's Vaishnava laity. It is also important to mention that almost the entire preaching career of Sri Chaitanya was spent not in Bengal but in Puri or Nilachal and now it fell on Adwaita Acharya and Nityananda to kindle the flame of divine love in the hearts of the common people of Bengal. Adwaita Acharya, like Nityananda was one of the principal followers of Chaitanya and has been mentioned with much respect in both

Caritamrita and Bhagabata. Adwaita was also instructed by Chaitanya to spread the name of Krishna without consideration of caste and by all accounts, he respected that order. He eventually settled in Santipur. Later, his followers and descendants started following Brahminical norms of orthodoxy in matters of worship. The Brahmin leaders of Nabadwip, who were originally shakta worshippers, have never really accepted Chaitanya's message of caste-less devotion and overt displays of emotions (ibid). Now Santipur and Nabadwip became two powerful centers of Vaishnavite orthodoxy.

Nityananda was avidly against such orthodox practices. Vaishnavite texts fail to give a proper account of his caste but he was apparently born in a Brahmin family. Despite this, he was the most instrumental in preaching the Chaitanyite religion to the lower castes and even the Chandals of Bengal (Dasgupta 1995). When he visited Saptagram, he also found widespread acceptance among the Vaishya caste there who have been called as low castes by most texts. It is surprising because Vaishyas are not really low castes according to Manu's Laws and they even have the right to read the Vedas. Most probably, these Vaishyas were followers of Buddhism which was still surviving among a section of the traders and businessmen class where it found initial acceptance. Nityananda converted all these Vaishyas into Chaitanya's way. He also preached successfully to a wide audience on both sides of the river Bhagirathi like Panihati, Khardaha, Saptagram etc. He visited even remote places in the riverine delta of eastern Bengal (ibid).

Guruvada or worshipping the spiritual teacher or master has a very important place in Sahajiya Vaishnavite traditions, including the Baul tradition. The guru, who is variously called Sai, Pir etc. by the Bauls is the very fountainhead of religious knowledge and his words and teachings are often considered to be more important than any scriptural guidance. The emphasis on a guru's role given by the Sahajiyas has to do with the secretive practices and ritual knowledge which only the guru possesses and who, in turn has learned these hidden rituals and processes from his Guru (Dasgupta 1995). Such teachings are often not written down and not discussed casually before strangers. There are many levels of initiation and training which a novice (male or female) has to undergo in order to be considered worthy to be taught the innermost workings of the sect. A primary emphasis of the Sahajiya school, including the Bauls seem to focus on heretic acts which seem to be

performed in defiance of prevalent social and religious norms upheld by the Brahmins and other upper caste members of the society. The dichotomy of purity and pollution which informs all the basic ideas of caste divisions in Hinduism are particularly targeted through such acts. Bamachar and other sensual practices in Tantra which were carried through to the Sahajiya belief only flout the established ideal norms in the fields of model sexual behavior, rules of intercourse and partaking of meat and alcohol etc (Chakrabarty 1996). However, Sahajiyas focused on the worship of body and considered all bodily things as sacred and assigned different positive spiritual attributes to them. The Vaishav Sahajiya view of Rasa, meaning the ability of a Sadhaka to savor the romantic relationship between the lord and his devotees and the high spiritual ground of Raganuga Bhakti was humanized with zeal by the Baul. The Baul, despite the innumerable differences in opinion and practice that exists between different guru and different schools of thought, considers the enjoyment of rasa to be of bodily nature, something they term as Charichandra or the four moons. Charichandra signifies four types of bodily produces namely, Semen, Menstrual Blood (Preferably of a virgin, which is highly prized), Urine and Feces (Jha 1999). Baul sects differ in the way they apply these and the significance they attach to each of them but veneration of these bodily produces is a common thread across the Baul faith. Some sects or Sampradayas only use two or three of the Chandras. Some eat and drink these as a means of readying the body for spiritual enlightenment (often understood as the ability to perform sex for long periods without being invested in the act and without ejaculating). Some apply them on their bodies for the same purpose. Beside the 'spiritual' benefit of the 'Chandras', they are also believed to immune one from many diseases and it is very common in a Baul household to perform preliminary treatment for any disease with these, along with medicinal plants and herbs locally available (ibid).

Identifying Bauls of Bengal: Regional Variations and the Complex Interconnection between Baul and Fakir Identities

Jeanne Openshaw, in her book 'Seeking Bauls of Bengal' starts with an acknowledgement of the irregularity and complexities involving a concrete definition of the Baul. She mentions that personalities like Rabindranath Tagore and K. Sen endorsed a view whereby Baul were seen as a group of people who deliberately wear tattered robes made from the

clothes of both Hindus and Muslims as an assertion of the non-dogmatic approach to religion and wander the villages of Bengal in search of the mythical 'man of the heart' or 'Moner Manush' (Openshaw 2004). The second group, comprising scholars such Upendranath Bhattacharya and J.N. Bhattacharya consider Baul to be a 'Sampraday' (tradition) or even a Sect with restricted membership and a distinct process of initiation (Bhattacharya 1957). Such scholars often emphasis the 'disreputable' nature of the Baul by focusing on the tantric-yogic sexual rights involved in such processes as well as important components of regular religious practices of the Baul. Openshaw understands that both these strands of thinking reduce the Baul identity to certain essentialisms which soon descends into stereotypes. (Openshaw 2004). That notwithstanding, it can safely be said that if there is one essential and most distinguishable feature of 'being' a Baul or being identified as one, commoners and scholars alike, it will be the Baul songs. Baul songs represent the philosophy as well liturgy of Bauls, they don't follow any other religious doctrine or text. However, the existence of a body of songs named Baul songs don't ease the problem of identifying the Bauls as an anthropological or sociological category as songs on certain themes and sung in a certain style can be categorized as 'Baul songs' although such songs may not be written or composed by people who follow the Baul 'lifestyle' or way of the Baul tradition. A further layer of complexity is added by the fact that Bauls come from both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds and their identity may vary considerably based on that. There is also the angle that Bauls form a continuity with the larger Indian traditions.

The Baul-Sahajiya Connection and complexities associated with the Baul identity

Hugh Urban (Urban 1993) looks to the tantric and Sahajiya texts such as the 'Vivarta Vilasa' and the Chariya padas to find meaning into the Sahajiya's emphasis on worshipping one's body and performing the heterodox acts which are bound to be vilifies by both mainstream Hinduism and Islam. although Urban has studied the Vaishnava Sahajiyas, similar kinds of conclusions can be drawn about the Muslim Bauls and Sahajiyas as well. It is quite well known that there exists considerable academic debate regarding the Sahajiya status of the Muslim Bauls and a large section of them despite the epithet Baul applied to them. Urban identifies that at the core of the discrimination associated with castes and jatis are physical attributes and their putative transfers through the medium of touch, food or drink, conjugal

union. It is because the body of the untouchable or other such depressed castes and jatis is considered impure that the supposedly 'purer' upper castes try to avoid the afore mentioned means of bodily communication at any cost. It is almost certain that this line of thought began with an ancient division of labour where a particular section of the populace was made to do dirty and defiling works for others. The simple and instinctive process of avoidance of a person or persons who are visibly filthy later coagulated into a universal belief in the purity and pollution of body. Therefore, the body of the untouchable is not merely a physical body, it is also a social construction which renders it inevitable impure, notwithstanding the actual state of the physical body. It is here that the brilliance of the Sahajiya doctrine lies in terms of breaking free of the dominant social imaginations of the untouchable body. And the doctrine uses the very concepts of the mainstream religion to achieve its goals. In Hinduism, a sadhak or an ascetic is considered to have found moksha, that is, freedom from the circle of birth and death and also from requirements of performing karma or duties. The various priestly rituals, routinely performed at different intervals of life of an upper caste are also nothing but rituals to purify the body in order to advance to a better stage or a higher plane. For example, the customary immersion in water of a Brahmin boy immediately after his sacred thread ceremony is done to purify him in order to advance to the stage of a practicing Brahmin. interestingly, the Brahmin is called Dwija or twice born, implying the creation of a new body which is as much physical as is social and spiritual because that body is now a socially and religiously accepted pure body, fit to officiate over worships and sacrifices.

Sahajiyas use this concept of purification of body and connect it to the tantric practices originally derived from tantric Buddhist practices where the body is described in alchemical terms. For example- everybody is said to have several power centers or Chakras which can be activated in a pre-determined fashion using the breadth and various secretions of the body. For the Sahajiya practitioner, his woman companion or consort acts as both the initiator and the catalyst for channelizing the secretions in a manner by which the Sadhak can finally activate all hi Chakras including the hypothetical 'thousand lotus Chakra' that sits at the head of the sadhaka. Following the Vaishnav parakiya tradition of imagining krishna as the supreme god and shakti and Radha as his divine consort, the Sahajiya practitioner equates the union of the holy secretions with the divine union of Radha and

Krishna. This is undoubtedly a very simplistic description of the process of Sahajiya sadhana but the emphasis here is not on the process itself but the outcome. After this divine union the sadhak enters a state of eternal bliss where he is liberated from the demands of the conventional public sphere. His world becomes one of divine madness and all engrossing state of rapture and vision (Kingsley in Urban 1993). In this state a man is not only free from conventional rationality but also from the caste system and the orthodox religion. He becomes the 'Sahaja- manusa' who has abandoned the duty of birth and conduct. Since the Saiva and Vaishnavite traditions describe a similar state of divine madness for one free of the worldly bondages (for example in Gita, Lord Krishna is seen saying to Arjun that he is free from all karma or duties and only performs them because he likes it or because such duties are part of the Lord's incarnation as a man of flesh). Now if karma is construed as duty, it naturally follows that the karma of a person depends on one's birth, that is, one's duty ultimately depends on one's caste or jati. Therefore, we see that even the concept of karma functions on the body of the individual, a body both physical and social. Partha Chatterjee points out that it is precisely because the orthodox caste system is defined largely in terms of the body, that the deviant or dissenting sects also turn to the body in order to resist, subvert and transcend the limitations of the orthodox hierarchy (ibid). the importance of the body as a tool of resistance is also evident in the requirement of secrecy for conducting the Sahajiya rituals. In fact, all heterodox sects prescribe some degree of secrecy during the conduct of their rituals as every such ritual purifies or liberates the body being acted upon. The secrecy is not only to protect the process of the ritual itself but also the body or bodies being purified or liberated as that act itself is an act of resistance against the great tradition religion.

Edward C Dimock in his 'The Bauls and the Islamic Tradition' quotes the famous author of Haramoni, Md. Mansur-Uddin (Dimock 1990) who states that to call the Bauls as Vaishnavas is an error. There may be some Bauls who can be called as such but most are neither Vaishnavas nor Sufis. This is the usual view coming from a member of the great tradition but Dimock opined that there are two types of the Vaishnava self. The official self is a social being and the unofficial self is the Sahajiya self which goes against all normal standards. The divine madman is not existing in the society in the sense Foucault describes the existence of a madman in medieval European society. He is also not existing as a

'disciplined' member of an industrial era asylum who is completely disconnected from the society. The divine madman exists as a part of both the great and little traditions of the society. Neither his conduct nor his rituals or even his heterodoxy are open to scrutiny from the great tradition by their own devise of moksha. The Baul does not openly flaunt his status as a divine madman because that will constitute a direct challenge to the orthodoxy. In light of the numerous attempts made to eradicate the Bauls and fakirs altogether from Bengal by the orthodox religions, the Baul maintains the façade of a socially acceptable man. Members of the Kartabhaja sect use to follow the same principle of developing a dual personality where they would violate social norms only in secrecy. This was undoubtedly a compromise for the sake of preservation of autonomy. Borrowing from Gramsci, Partha Chatterjee called the development of this dual identity as a "passive revolution" and "a strategy devised within a relationship of dominance and subordination" (Chatterjee 2012). It is these forms of resistance and dissent which has been termed as infra- politics by Scott although only one definition of infrapolitics, that is, acts of political significance made using methods which do not cross the threshold of politics, may qualify these Sahajiya practices as infra-politics (Scott 1990).

Aul, Baul, Sidhha, Sain, Darvesh: Many Sects or One?

Baul has been used as a blanket term for all practitioners of folk religions in Bengal who developed their own songs and practiced some degree of Deha Sadhana either in secret or in open till late 19th century. During this period, western attempts at formal classification of the Bengali society was beginning following Risley's pioneering work (Risley 1891). Both western scholars and British civil servants tried to make sense of the innumerable divisions existing in the Bengali Hindu society and it is during this time that the identity of several local sects as well as largely independent folk religions became fused under the single identity of Baul. After Rabindranath Tagore's 'rediscovery' of Bauls and introduction of their songs and tunes to a new educated Bengali audience, Bauls started to be identified mostly through their songs. Since most of the curated songs presented to this audience by Rabindranath, Jyotirindranath Tagore and Muhammad Mansur-uddin (author of Haramoni) carefully avoided the more scandalous or more obscure and secretive songs regarding Deha Tatwa and emphasized the purportedly 'secular' and universal philosophy found in Baul

songs, they gained a new respect and status (Banerjee 1967). This brought about a significant change in the Baul identity as many folk singers in the villages who were not Baul but lower caste 'Jat Vaishnavas', started to sing Baul songs for monetary gains. While Lalan Fakir was still alive, many educated and urban young men formed their own Baul groups, imitating the attire and the musical style of the Bauls. Some imitators like Fikirchand and Rupchand became so popular that they overshadowed Lalan himself. Lalan expressed his anger at the dilution of the Baul songs and the Baul way of life in the hands of these amateurs in some of his songs (Jha 1999).

There exists considerable confusion regarding the identity of Bauls because a number of folk religion practitioners, village singers and general mendicant wanderers have all been subsumed into the category of Baul. Bairagi, yogi, sadhu, fakir, dorbesh, kapali, neraneri- these are but a few such identities which are now conflated with the Baul identity. (ibid)
A more serious problem of identification exists with the dual terminology of 'Aul' and Baul. Both these terms have been used in different Bengali thesauruses to denote someone who is 'mad in divine love'. The etymology of the word Baul is traced from Chandi Mongal of Mukunda and Shunya Sanhita of Orissi poet Achutananda where the word was linked with Nath Sampradaya and especially with followers of Gorakshanath (ibid). in a 15th century poem, Goraksha Bijay- written in the Charyapada language- Baul is mentioned as a person who is inclined to an easy or pleasure filled way of worship while disregarding the Vedic rituals.

'Aul' has been considered a simple transformation of the word Baul by scholars like Akshay Kumar Dutta and Shashibhushan Dasgupta. There is another group of scholars who support the theory of a Persian origin of the word. According to this view, expressed by Brojendranath Shil and Abu Talib the word is derived from Persian 'awaal' (Ghosh 2020). A large majority of Muslim scholars of the subject favored the theory of Persian origin. these same scholars (Abdul Halim, Anwarul Karim, Md. Solaiman Ali etc.) also hold the view that Sufism in medieval Bengal is a primary inspiration behind the emergence of these sects. The overlook or nullify the greater Indian tradition of temporal and corporeal philosophy and Sadhana to arrive at this conclusion.

Another scholar, Upendranath Bhattacharya identifies the sanskrit word ‘batul’ or mad as the source of the later folk corruption Baul. Madness is in fact, an inalienable part of the esoteric Sadhak’s identity in India (Bhattacharya 1957). This madness is more of a camouflage for him who uses it to hide his true knowledge or his techniques of sadhana. Another advantage of this divine madness is that when a person is considered mad, he becomes free from the societal rules and restrictions, irrespective of his caste identity. He is not persecuted for his heterodox beliefs as he is not considered as a threat to the society. Jha adds that along with this deliberate madness, the secret sadhana which involves breadth control, use of hallucinogens etc. may also lead to temporary madness. Therefore, it can be asserted that ‘batul’ or mad might not be the sole precursor of the term Baul but there is definitely an element of society- defying madness in Baul. The exclusively Sufi interpretation of the word overlooks these factors as well as the numerous use of both the words Baul and ‘aul’ in Chaitanya Charitamrita itself where he and his principal followers have often been called Baul and Chaitanya himself has been referred to as ‘maha Baul’ or the great Baul. (Sahajiya o gouriyo Vaishnava dharma (Das 1988).

In the varied descriptions of ‘auls’ and Bauls found in all medieval and later texts the element of defiance of Vedic rights and the caste system is a common element. The non-sadhakas (scholars, British census expert etc.) have differentiated the groups of Baul, ‘aul’ etc. mostly in terms of the their sadhana technique such as sole reliance on the control of breadth, use of Char- chandra etc. however, the practitioners or members of these sects view the different terminologies of Baul, ‘auls’, darbesh and sain as four stages of a single way of sadhana (Jha 1999). according to Jha, they have been influenced by the four-fold varna division of the Hindu society in their approach where varna was understood as a fluid marker based on ones work or achievements.

Understood this way, ‘auls’ is the lowest or ‘beginner’ stage of sadhana, progressively advancing to the stages of Baul, darbesh and sain. These darbeshes have no relation to the Muslim ‘Dervish’ which is a Turkish word used to describe a particular type of Sufi mystics easily identified by their distinctive head gear and their trans inducing circular patterns of dance. These Hindu ‘auls’, Baul and Darbeshes use Vaishnava diacritical marks such as the ‘kanthi’ (a necklace of beads made usually from the Tulsi plant). Moreover, this four-fold

division has precedent in Vaishnava practices as well, especially in the Sahajiya karchas. This four-fold division of ones seniority or success in the path of sadhana has been described in these Karchas as sthul, probarta, sadhak and siddha (Jha 1999). The term sain is most likely a later corruption of siddha and like the siddha, the sain is free from the compulsion of wearing any distinctive marks or adhering to any prohibition regarding food and drink. Ramakrishna mentioned this link between siddha and sain, according to the Kathamrita and said that there is no difference between the Vedantic paramhansa (a title attributed to Ramakrishna himself) and the sain of Baul (ibid). While it must be agreed that Bauls are indeed accommodating of different religions and the ways of sadhana as well as religious terminologies of Hindu and Muslims Bauls and Fakirs overlap at times but it will be wrong to simply group them in a single 'secular' category of rural humanists who express themselves through their songs.

Hindu Baul and Muslim Fakir: Different Stories in Rarh and Bagri

The identity of the Bengali Bhadrolok is almost entirely dependent on his inclusion in the complex cultural world whose parameters are defined by the elite of Bengal's morbid colonial metropolis. All other urban centers of Bengal and their bhadrolok class follow Kolkata's cultural cues (Chatterjee 2001). Lack of intra-regional diversity in culture of the elite is however, offset by the remarkable variations in folk culture. Such local iterations are accepted and encouraged by the elite as a parallel form of culture and treated in a romantic way as expression of the proletariat's consciousness. However, once a folk cultural symbol is identified and accepted, it usually becomes a set type, a caricature of itself which can then be re-created and re-performed as per the convenience of the rulers. An example of this is the vulgar use of Santhal tribal dance as an aperitif for mega political events and rallies all over the state. Similarly, the elite and the common Bengalis alike have taken a set view of what a Baul is and that vision necessitates a dancing, singing man who dresses and acts in a certain way. This 'identity' has numerous limitations in terms of encompassing the breadth of groups and individuals who adhere to the Baul worldview to differing extents. Fakirs are such a group who are considered synonymous with Bauls by most, leading to the numerous 'Baul-Fakir Evenings' organized all over the state as a laudable form of evening entertainment. In reality, the Fakir identity is not only different from the Baul, but the

differences are substantial and contrary to the popular belief, the two groups are not always accommodative of each other. Muslim groups such as Dervish, Qalandar and Qawwals are not Bauls at all. They may use some Baul paraphernalia (most prominently, frequent use of Marijuana and other hallucinogens) but they are Muslims who obey the Shariat to some extent and do not practice Dehasadhana. The more conservative among them do not pay any respect to the Vaishnava tradition (although some less conservative ones do- the level of acceptance usually decreasing according to the status and following of the Guru). Some Qawwals have started following strict interpretations of Islamic Law to such an extent that they have stopped playing accompanying music with their songs, barring some percussion instruments. In some families with generations of musical heritage, music is now being thought of as 'Haram' and the new generation, either ashamed or afraid to continue the legacy of their ancestors, are choosing different professions.

In fact, contrary to the popular secular narrative, preferred by the Bengali intelligentsia regarding Bauls, field study reveals that many Hindu Vaishnava Bauls don't even accept food from Muslim Bauls. They may appear in a 'Sadhu Sabha' or gathering of Muslim Bauls or Fakirs but they will not accept the food there. The same has been accepted by Shaktikanta Jha as well (Jha 1999).

When one talks about the Bauls of Bengal, usually one thinks about the Bauls associated with Shantiniketan and the legacy of Tagore. It will make an interesting study to trace the history and number of Bauls in Shantiniketan and in the whole of Rarh region (encompassing the Districts of Birbhum, Bardhaman and Bankura on the western side of Bengal, the land of red clay). The fact is that Rabindranath Tagore himself had his first serious encounter with a Baul in his family Zamindari in East Bengal (Bhattacharya 1957). He was highly appreciative of the songs of Lalon Fakir and described them as beautiful and eloquent expressions of complex themes in a simple and rustic forms, but interestingly, he was not interested in interacting with the Bauls of Birbhum and those near his Ashram at Shantiniketan. On this regard, Khitimohan Sen expressed the view that Tagore considered all Bauls of Birbhum as 'Jat Baishnav' singers and not as true Bauls. Since these singers practiced Vaishnavism and conducted idol worship of Radha and Krishna, the Bramha Tagore did not consider studying them (Sen 1957). As an interaction between Sudhir

Chakrabarty and the brother of the famous Purna Das Baul reveals, they practice daily worship of Krishna in a traditional Hindu manner and take Gotra name like the Sahajiya Vaishnavas. Further field work by him revealed that even in the first decade of the new Millenium, the situation remained the same in most of Rarh. Because of the influx of domestic and foreign tourists and the successful establishment of a 'culture industry' around Shantiniketan patronised by the educated Bengalis of Kolkata, a lot of local people now call themselves Baul and sing professionally on stage without the faintest association with the Baul way of life. They are mostly Vaishnavas who have taken a Guru so that they can flaunt the Guru's name and lineage and therefore establish themselves as true Bauls. They have learned to answer a few common questions usually posed by inquisitive and naive 'Bhadrolok' Bengalis who go to Shantiniketan to have an 'authentic' Baul experience.

As discussed above, Bauls of Shantiniketan are almost exclusively Hindu Vaishnavas and it is rare to see a Muslim Guru or disciple among the Bauls there. The religion-based division between Hindu Bauls and Muslim Fakirs is stark in Rarh. Even during the venerated Poush Mela, which a large number of Bauls and Fakirs attend, there is a clear division drawn between the two. Even their living and fooding arrangements are done differently. Also, as per Chakrabarty, Bauls of Rarh have made themselves more attractive and 'marketable' through their colourful dress, on-stage antics and contemporary songs which have more entertainment value than spiritual (Chakrabarti 2009). Fakirs are not being able to compete with Bauls in terms of popularity because firstly, songs are secondary in the spiritual journey of the Fakirs who rely more on breathing exercises (dum-jikir). Secondly, the attire of Fakirs is much simpler and they lack the wherewithal of a section of Bauls who know how to ingratiate themselves with a useful urban clientele. The urban intelligentsia is usually not interested in Fakirs, leading to their discriminated and backward status in the Rarh region (ibid).

It is a fact that except in the Nadia-Murshidabad and Rarh region, Bauls do exist in other parts of West Bengal. For example, in North Bengal, Baul festivals are arranged regularly. However, the number of Bauls is very less in these areas and they are not a part of the local cultural heritage. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, Bauls of Bengal can be divided into two categories, Bauls of Rarh and Bauls of Bagri (Nadia-Murshidabad region) (Jha 1999).

Sufism in Bengal and Connection with the Bauls

Emergence of Sufism and Evolution of the Sufi philosophy

Hazrat Muhammad was born in 570 AD and he preached a new religion influenced by the Abrahamic religions already prevalent in and around Arabia. The simple and egalitarian nature of Islam delivered the Arabs from their ancient Pegan religious practices which included wanton violence, ritual sacrifices and general instability in society. However, within 30 years of Muhammad's death (635 AD) serious differences arose between his followers over both religious and political doctrine. During this time, a particular group of Muslims started to interpret the Quran and the Sunna in light of pure reason and they became famous as Mu'tazila (Jha 1999). This group eventually came to question the literal interpretation of Quran that is considered as the pillar of Islam. Therefore, the Mu'tazila can be regarded as the first predecessors of the Sufis. During 7th and 8th century, Muslim scholars came into contact with Greek and Roman philosophy through their ties with the East Roman empire. Therefore, rationalism became a popular part of early Islam and once during the rule of Khalifa Al-Mamun, Mu'tazila-ism even received royal patronage. An offshoot of Mu'tazila-ism was Qadri interpretation of Islam which espoused that Allah is flawless and just because he created man the follies of mankind cannot be attributed to him (ibid). Qadris therefore focused on the natural justice that exists in the nature of man and it is from them that mystic Islam started focusing on man rather than heaven or the after-life.

From the above discussion it would be premature to assume that these predecessors of Sufism could flourish without hindrances. The establishment of Umayyad Caliphate led to persecution of these early Sufis and one can find instances of execution of Sufi leaders as early as 669 AD and 723 AD. (Wayahab 1999).

Upendranath Bhattacharya opined that early Sufi mystics attempted to present a more humane and acceptable face of Islam to attract new followers in the newly conquered lands (Bhattacharya 1957). The nature of Allah as understood from the Quran is that of an all-powerful adjudicator and he is an entity to be feared and not loved. Therefore, Sufis tried

to present Allah as a benevolent benefactor and one which Muslims can freely love. Although in early Sufism, ethics were more important than mysticism, two important attributes of later Sufis, i.e., asceticism and quietist philosophy was present in them. These ascetics presented a contrast against the excesses of the Khalifas and the Sultans and therefore commanded instant respect from the people (Wayahab 1999).

A new Sufism emerged from the second half of the 9th century. This ideology was influenced by old Persian philosophy, various Indian philosophies as well as Neo-Platonism. New Sufism also had a political context. The development of traditional Islamic teachers or Ulema under the patronage of the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates led to the emergence of a radically different interpretation of Islam. The principal attributes of new Sufism were- that Allah is not only an impartial adjudicator or the keeper of heaven but his existence is all-pervading and omnipresent. The entire existence and Allah are not different but manifestations of the same entity. The second primary attribute was the belief that man through his devotion and acceptance of Allah can, in fact be one with him. This is unarguably a very non-Islamic belief because the cardinal belief of Islam is that Allah is La- Sharik or that he has no equal and he cannot be divided (ibid).

New Sufis have a long history of coming to India and preaching their brand of Islam. Mansur Hallaj who died in 922 AD was one of the first Sufi masters who came to the western part of India from Persia. He was the first to express the famous Sufi declaration of 'Ana- l-Haqq', that is, I am Haqq or I am Allah (ibid). This was considered to be extremely anti-Islamic and he had to suffer long periods of incarceration and a particularly gruesome execution because of his beliefs. The martyrdom of Hallaj for his beliefs caused great interest in his ideology and it is after his death that Sufism spread fast in India. Taking inspiration from the Quran itself, Hallaj declared that Allah created the first man Adam as an expression of his love for mankind. Adam was such a pure and perfect creation that Allah ordered all his angels to do a Sejda or worship of Adam, despite it was being expressly forbidden in Quran to do Sejda before anyone but Allah. It is said that all angels except Azrael complied with his command and because Azrael did not, he was banished to the nether worlds by Allah. Using this story of Quran Hallaj attempted to establish the supremacy of man in the path of belief and wanted to dispel any suspicions among his

followers regarding the possibility of one-ness with Allah for a mere man. After Hallaj, Al-Gajjali, Jalauddin Rumi, Sadi, Hafez emerged as the principal exponents of neo- Sufism (ibid). Rumi, Sadi and Hafez were all active during 13th and 14th century and because of their exquisite poetry through which they expressed their concept of divine love and Sufi mysticism; Sufism achieved unparallel popularity during their time. In fact, Sufism became the primary tool for Islamic proselytization. It can be proven using the contemporary chronicles of the early Muslim rulers of India that they were well acquainted with the Sufi philosophy. There exists a 13th century manuscript written in amateurish Sanskrit in Bengal which attests that Sufis came to Bengal and even received royal patronage before the invasion of Bakhtiyar Khilji in 1202 (ibid).

One of the earliest books mentioning the Bauls of Bengal Akshay Kumar Dutta's 'Bharat Borsher Upashok Sampradaya'- which mentions Bauls as a Vaishnava sect among many which adopted a Sahajiya interpretation of Vaishnavism (Dutta 1907). However, the same book differentiates between Bauls, Sahajiya and 'Nyara' Fakirs and treats these as three distinct sects. Dutta's book describes a few songs of Bauls and praises them for their simplicity and beauty but avoids any discussion about their religious practices on account of these being vulgar (ibid). It can be said that Dutta treated Bauls with the same horrified fascination that a colonial ethnographer studying the sacrificial rituals of some unknown tribe would show. Due to the lack of direct communication with the Bauls, he had made some outrageous claims about them such as- Bauls eat the flesh of dead humans (with the funny but sincere explanation that they seek out the dead and don't kill people). A similar claim made by him was that they wear the clothes of dead people which they exhume from graves. Such claims will not only completely confound a Baul today but they are also unique to Dutta's book only.

Although collection of Baul songs have been published since the 1930s but Kshiti Mohan Sen's book on Bauls and Baul songs was the first instance if scholarly treatment of the subject. Following him, a number of research works were published in the 1950s and 1960s. Among these, Upendranath Bhattacharya's book published in 1957 is considered a key text on the subject and contains an authoritative collection of Baul songs without changing their nature or wordings to appeal to an educated audience.

In the preface of his book, 'Banglar Baul o Baul Gaan', Upendranath Bhattacharya states that in his childhood Bauls were not considered the cultural icons or singers that they are now. They were considered as beggars who were an integral part of the rural scene of eastern Bengal. They were a particularly common sight in districts like Kusthia and Nadia. They didn't engage in any other economic activities and didn't always sing for alms. When they did, their songs were not much different from that of a common Vaishnava beggar and they seldom sang to the common householder their secret ritualistic songs. Upendranath Bhattacharya began his field work in 1937 and continued for more than two decades in the obscure villages of eastern Bengal. He is also notable for organizing probably the first academically oriented congregation of Bauls in 1940 at Silaidaha, Rabindranath Tagore's zamindari. This congregation called 'Nikhil Banga Pally Sahitya Sanmelan' assembled Bauls and Fakirs from seven districts and organized discussion sessions from which hitherto unknown aspects of Baul life came to the fore (Bhattacharya 1957).

Bhattacharya mentions 1625 as the year from which Bauls emerged as a result of religious and cultural synthesis that took place between Sahajiya Vaishnavas and Muslim Fakirs. The first texts describing a distinct Baul way of worship could be observed after 1700. Bhattacharya mentions the widely popular belief among the Fakirs of Bengal that Madhab Bibi, a Muslim woman, was the guru of Virabhadra, the son of Nityananda and mentions that this story proves the close link between Sufi Islam and Bauls. (ibid).

First mention of the word Baul is found in 'Sri Krishna Vijaya' of Maladhar Basu, dated 1441 A.D. Here Baul is mentioned as a person who is like a Rakshasa, who is naked and eating raw meat. (Mittra 1944). Next mention of Bauls is found in Chaitanya Charitamrita. Bhattacharya quotes Sukumar Sen to establish that Charitamrita was written between 1580-81. Another contemporary text which mentions Bauls is the 'Ragatmika Pada' of Chandidas. Here too, Bauls are described as people who are far from Dharma. This can be an indication that Bauls might have existed as a distinct sect even before the advent of Sri Chaitanya. Further credence is lent to this theory by the numerous mentions of 'Baul' in Charitamrita (Chakrabarty 1996). It is a common belief that the word Baul is mentioned in Charitamrita only as a part of the popular riddle written to Chaitanya by Adwaita but this is

not the case. The word Baul is mentioned at least seven times in Adi, Madhya and Anta Lila portions of Charitamrita and in all these instances, it signifies a man who is mad in divine love of Krishna. In one interesting instance, Chaitanya has been called a 'Maha-Baul'. This particular sloka is derived from a similar sloka mentioned in Jagyabalka Samhita where a connection between Baul and Kapalika has been made (Bhattacharya 1957). Simultaneous mention of Kapalika and Baul again raises the question whether Bauls existed as a roaming group of Sadhus like Kapalikas before Chaitanya but it is a question about which only speculations are possible. Despite this limitation, Bhattacharya is keen to prove his theory and emphasises that Adwaita himself was a practitioner of Tantra who used 'Prakriti' or women in his sadhana. Therefore, he called himself 'Maha-Baul' at times. Thus, Bhattacharya wants to establish a connection between Tantrics and Bauls in the 16th century Bengal. Another interesting hypothesis regarding the origin of Bauls was advanced by Bhattacharya and supported by historians like Nihar Ranjan Roy and Nagendra Nath Basu. They link Bauls with the 'Abadhut' ascetics. Abadhuts are a class of ascetics who take inspiration from the sadhana of Buddhist Acharyas. That they don't accept any caste barriers and live a 'morally deplorable' life was mentioned by Bose. According to him, Bauls are just a section of Abdhuts (Bose 1930). Bhattacharya mentions that the word Baul may have an etymological connection with 'Batul' or mad, following a popular theory of the word's origin. However, he also mentions that the word may be derived from 'Bayu' or breathing air, which these ascetics control as part of their sadhana technique (ibid). This does not mean, however, that all Indian ascetics who practice some form of breathing technique can be termed Bauls because it is an extremely common method practiced by Indian ascetics. Only those who show an outward 'madness' can be termed as Bauls.

Emergence of Fakirs in Bengal and the link between Bauls and Fakirs

Bhattacharya holds the view that a large section of Buddhists who practiced some form of Tantric Buddhism from Pala era converted to Islam after being persecuted and marginalised during the Sen era. He somewhat casually remarks that those who could not completely forego the beliefs and practices of their ancestors, eventually became Fakirs of Bengal. They were known as 'Nyara' or 'Nyarar Fakir' (Bhattacharya 1957). He further states that these Fakirs have been influenced by Sufism and Vaishnavism. Another section of these

Buddhists did not take to Islam but converted to Vaishnavism under the influence of Virbhadra and came to known as 'Nyara-Neri' Vaishnavas. According to Bhattacharya, only those adhering to Hinduism can be called 'Bauls'. Those who follow the five tenets or pillars of Islam (Kalema, Namaj, Roja, Hajj, Zakat) called 'Aqidah' to some extent should be called Fakirs (ibid). The Hindu Bauls are variously called 'Rasik Panthi' or 'Raganuga-Panthi' by their educated Vaishnava peers but common people often do not differentiate them from Vaishnavas. Whatever their way of worship or Sadhana may be, all Bauls and Fakirs ultimately try to achieve a similar objective, i.e., attaining a state of unwavering and unspeakable pleasure that reveals to the practitioner the true nature of the One. This is achieved through yogic union of Prakriti and Purusha or man and woman. Whoever follows this path, can be termed as a Baul or Fakir. What makes Bauls distinctive from other similar sects is the practice of using bodily products for sadhana. These are called 'Chandra' or moon by the Bauls and they firmly believe in the spiritual, magical and healing properties of the Chandras, when used correctly. Bhattacharya mentions that earlier writers on the topic such as Akshay Kumar Dutta and Manindra Mohan Bose could not really understand the meaning of 'Chandra' and confused the practice of using Chandras (called Chandra-Veda in Baul texts and oral teachings. Veda implies knowing the secret of something) with the Shat Chakra Veda of the Tantrics (Dutta 1907). Not all Bauls or Fakirs use all four Chandras but all of them practice Chandra-Veda to some extent. Guru or Murshid is the sole authority on these matters and he allows or forbids the use of Chandras depending on the spiritual progress of the disciple. Baul philosophy holds that the body of a common man (sthul deha) needs to prepared for the higher stages of sadhana. The moderately prepared body is called 'Pakka Deha' and the fully prepared body is called 'Sidhha Deha'. The number of Chandras allowed to a disciple and the frequency of use permitted usually denotes how far a disciple (shishya or 'Murid') has advanced in making his body prepared for sadhana (Jha 1999).

Use of the four Chandras is extremely important to identify Bauls and Fakirs as a distinct group. Although many other sects in India follow similar breathing techniques, use Prakriti for sadhana and even practice partaking of semen (Apapanthi, Paltudasis etc.), but no other sect uses the four Chandras as part of sadhana (Dasgupta 1995). The practice of Chari Chandra also firmly establishes a connection between Fakirs and Bauls and proves that

despite formally adhering to different great tradition religions, both form a single sect. Earlier writer like Dutta were not appreciative of these practices. In fact, these horrified their refined urban sensibilities so much that they accused Bauls of all sorts of malpractices such as cavorting with many women in the name of sadhana and living a filthy life, partaking filthy things (Dutta 1907). They could not appreciate the role of Char Chandra in creating the core of Baul identity and therefore differentiated between Baul, Aul, Nera, Sai and Kartabhaja etc. While the Kartabhaja does indeed exist as a different but related sect, but there is no independent existence of the other sects mentioned. They all fall within the ambit of Baul on account of their Chari Chandra practices.

Bhattacharya dispelled another commonly accepted attribute of Bauls that they are all mendicants who wholly depend on alms provided by villagers. He agrees that might have been the case for a large number of Bauls even during the first decade of the twentieth century. However, his fieldwork, conducted mostly during the fourth and fifth decade of the century, revealed that a lot of Bauls and Fakirs living in the eastern districts of Khulna, Kusthia, Narsingdi etc. were landowning farmers. Some were associated with small jobs and businesses. Begging, although not entirely absent, was not a common identifier of the Baul sect anymore (Bhattacharya 1957).

That leaves a final point of commonality which connects these groups, i.e., their songs. It is undoubtedly true that all Sahajiya groups in Bengal use songs to teach their disciples, to preserve the orally transmitted teachings and ritual secrets taught by the guru. Dancing while singing these devotional and sometimes enciphered songs is also very common. However, Sudhir Chakraborty (Chakrabarty 2014) shows that songs are a more intimate part of the Muslim Fakirs' way of worship with deeply religious overtones that lacks the popular appeal and flamboyance of the contemporary Hindu Baul songs. Bhattacharya referred to songs collected by Kshitimohan Sen and Mohammad Mansur-Uddin. Sen's collection of Baul songs was the first scholarly attempt to study these and created quite a stir in educated Bengali society who were highly impressed with the beauty and underlined philosophy of these songs. It is can be argued that Sen along with Tagore established Baul songs as an integral part of what was shaping up to be 'Bengali Culture' in colonial India. Bhattacharya (Bhattacharya 1957), however, claimed that many of the songs collected and

published by Sen were not authentic. On the basis of his long association with Bauls Bhattacharya deciphered that many of the songs published by Sen were the works of modern poets and song writers because the writing style and the complex philosophical positions taken in these songs is not congruent with what he described as 'two centuries worth of Baul songs' (ibid). He regarded Mansur-Uddin's collection to be more authentic. He pointed out another significant difference between the way Bauls and Fakirs perform their songs. Fakir's usually sing with other Fakirs or their disciples and they sit in a circle much like the Persian Sufis, where this kind of music is called 'Sama'. Bhattacharya claims that the Vaishnava tradition of kirtan introduced by Sri Chaitanya might have been influenced by this Sufi tradition. Bauls, on the other hand, perform frequently in non-religious settings and they have a tradition of writing song on contemporary social and political issues.

According to Bhattacharya, by the time his book was published, the Baul and Fakir society of Bengal was heading for oblivion. There was crippling poverty, staunch resistance from Shariati Muslim leaders and societal recognition was still far from realized (ibid). There were very few new recruits, the old 'akharas' were breaking down and no new influential Baul guru or song writer has emerged since the 1920s. Therefore, Bhattacharya predicted an early demise of these sects and treated his own book as a kind of memorabilia to preserve the songs of a soon to be forgotten people.

Sufism in Bengal

There are only a few historical accounts of early Medieval Bengal. This paucity of academic resources results in much difficulties in ascertaining the role of Sufi preachers in the spread of Islam in Bengal and their general influence on the people and culture of Bengal. The available contemporary accounts can be divided into two types. Firstly, one can consider the Arabic or Persian accounts written by the companions of the early Muslim warriors and conquerors. Texts such as Tabaquat-i-Nasiri and Tariq-e-Firuzshahi fall into this category. Secondly, one can consider the accounts written by the Sufi preachers and their followers. These documents were sometimes written in Sanskrit, although of a very pedestrian kind (Skeikh Subhodaya is an example), and sometimes in Bengali (Gyan Dipak, Gyan Pradip

etc.) (Wayahab 1999). the Bengali texts were often written in Payar meter, to resonate better with their primarily Hindu audience who were used to hearing the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in the same way.

According to the methodology used by Prof. Md. Enamul Haq and Dr. Abdul Wayahab in their Tracts on Sufism, the period of Sufi influence and spread can be organized chronologically into eras; each era corresponding with the advent of a new Sufi Tariqa or sect. This does not mean that introduction of a new Tariqa reduced the influence of earlier Sufi school of thoughts. Contemporary popular Sufi shrines in both eastern and western Bengal attest to the continuing veneration received by most major Sufi schools to the present day (ibid).

The political situation of Bengal and India at large definitely influenced the spread of Sufism and accounts for the introduction of new Sufi schools at different turns of history. Prof. Haq argues that till the beginning of the 14th century; the Sufi leaders of north India acted as guiding lights for Sufis in Bengal (Haq 1975). The newly converted Muslims of Bengal, coming predominantly from the oppressed lowers castes, were too much in awe of them to develop an indigenous form of Islamic mysticism. However, the establishment of an independent and powerful sultanate in Bengal led to the development of local and unique expressions of Sufism. Although all major Sufi orders which flourished in Bengal till the 17th century had links with North Indian orders, but their preachers became increasingly more Bengali in attitude. It is not the sword of Islam but the message of simplicity and humanity spoken by the Sufis that caused large scale conversion to Islam in Bengal. It can be observed that Eastern Bengal was a more fertile ground for Sufi activities and attracted a lot more people to the fold of Islam than the western areas. A probable reason for this may lie in the remoteness of most areas of eastern Bengal which have not received any touch of economic development. These marginalized people not only became Muslims, but continued the practice of their Hindu ancestors by exchanging one object of worship for another- the new one being their Sufi guru or Murshid. Throughout Bengal, and especially in East Bengal, worshipping the shrine or Mazar of Sufis is a very common practice. According to Enamul Haq, the practice of using Hindu paraphernalia such as sindur and turmeric for worship in their Mazars was a common practice before the 19th century Islamic

revival in the country (Haq 1975). This is not to say that Sufis themselves became Hinduised, in a ritualistic sense. They never transgressed so far that they denied the 'Tawhid' or oneness and supreme majesty of Allah. However, they were successful in presenting to the common people of Bengal a more human and intimate face of Islam where Allah is not only to be feared and obeyed but also loved. This appealed greatly to the Bengali psyche. Their adoption of the practice of Hindu yogis such as 'Dam' and 'Dhikr', which are very much similar to the breath controlling and chanting done by Hindu Sadhus further cemented their position as ascetics in another garb in the Bengali mind and explains their popularity (ibid).

From the beginning of the 13th century, several Sufi saints belonging to the different orders began to come to Bengal and established themselves in Khanaqahs (a place for residence and teachings for a Sufi preacher) in different parts of Bengal. The earliest of these belonged to the Suhrawardy order of Sufis. According to 'Sheikh Subhodaya' (advent of the holy man) a document written in Sanskrit which provided the earliest account of Sufism in Bengal, the first Sufi leader was Makhdoom-Shaykh-Jalal-Ud-din- Tabrizi who established himself in Gaur even before the invasion of Bakhtiyar Khilji (Wayahab 1999). According to Subhodaya, he was granted land at Gaur to establish a Khanaqah by Lakshman Sen. This might lead one to think that the Sen rulers were kindly disposed to the Sufis but that might not be correct. There is a legend mentioned in Subodaya that Ballal Sen, the father of Lakshman Sen, executed a Sufi for preaching in North Bengal. Whatever the case may be, there is no doubt that the conquest of Khilji made Bengal more hospitable to Sufis. Notable Sufis from the Suhrawardy order followed Tabrizi, out of which the most remarkable was Shah Jalal Mujarrad-I-Yamani, known simply as Shah Jalal by his millions of Bengali followers. Jalal was both a warrior and a preacher. He was a towering figure among those responsible for the spread of Islam in the far eastern part of Bengal and Assam. His popularity as a preacher is still felt though the ballads sung in his name in Bangladesh and Barak valley of Assam. He died in Sylhet in 1346 (ibid).

the second order to arrive in Bengal was the Chishti. Shaykh Farid-Uddin Shakrganj and Abdullah Kirmani were famous ascetics and teachers of this Tariqa. Another famous Sufi of the Christi order who had a profound impact in Bengal was Shaykh Akhi-Siraj-Ud-

Uddin-Badayuni who died in 1357 AD. A disciple of Nizamuddin Awliya, Badayuni was better known as Akhi Siraj who firmly established the Christi order in Bengal (Haq 1975).

The third order or Sufis to enter Bengal was the Qalandariyah. The somewhat eccentric, perpetually roaming ascetics of this order were different from other Sufi sects in their attire and attitude. They attracted followers by their unorthodox style of worship, ecstatic singing and dancing. By the 15th- 16th century, Qalandars were a common sight throughout Bengal and both common Hindus and Muslims started referring to any wandering mystic as Qalandars. They have found mention in 'Chandi Kabya' written by Kabi Kankan Mukundaram. Qalandars were very keen on incorporating the Hath Yoga practices of Hindu mystics in their worship. There exists a Sufi tract written by this order named 'Yoga Qalandar' to illustrate their interest in the field (ibid).

Other Sufi sects which established themselves in Bengal were Madari, Adhami or Khijri, Naqshbandi and Qadri. The first notable saint among these orders was Shah-I-Madar whose shrine still attracts a large number of devotees in Faridpur district of Bangladesh and parts of North-Eastern Bengal. The account of the Adhami or the Khijri sect is interesting because it is not their preachers but a semi-mythical seventh century Arab saint who the order traced their lineage from, who became extremely popular in Bengal. The fishermen and boatmen of the riverine delta areas of Bengal were particularly predisposed to his veneration. Enamul Haq states that for all practical purposes, Khwaja Khijir, as the saint came to be known, became associated with the safety and good fortune of these people and virtually replaced other Gods or spirits in whom the river folk believed before their conversion to Islam (Haq 1975). A very significant number of Hindus venerated Khwaja Khijir. This led to the observation of a peculiar yearly festival, held in the banks of rivers by people of both religions called 'Bera- Bhasan', evidence of which is available from as early as the fifteenth century.

Naqshbandi and Qadri are later orders which entered Bengal during the Mughal rule. While Naqshbandi Sufis received patronage from Shah Jahan, Qadri Sufis became powerful during Aurangzeb's reign. His brother Dara Shikoh was also a great patron of the Qadri order and his books mention that he sincerely practiced the difficult breath retention

techniques followed by the Sufis of this order. Thus, one can chart the spread of Sufism in Bengal over a long period of almost seven hundred years; starting from twelfth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Haq divided this long era of Sufi influence into three distinct periods- early, middle and modern. The middle period corresponding roughly to fifteenth to seventeenth century, is the most interesting in terms of amalgamation of different beliefs and rise of the Bhakti movement. This is the period when 'popular Islam' was taking shape (ibid). Most of the minor religious sects and traditions of Bengal such as Baul, Kartabhaja, Fakir etc. Have their roots in this historic period. During this period, Sufis were so popular that Sufi Islam eclipsed traditional or orthodox Islam in Bengal and became the religion patronised by rulers. Sufis started to influence court politics and many Sufi preachers effectively played the role of 'Kulaguru' or hereditary advisers and spiritual masters for Kings and the nobles. Political influence of the Sufis was so great that a Sufi master contemporary of the Hindu King Rajah Ganesh of Bengal is said to have played a crucial role in the conversion of Ganesh's son Jadu who took the name Jalal-Ud-Din and continued Muslim rule in Bengal (ibid).

Sufis were able to spread their beliefs in Bengal for a number of reasons. Firstly, the simple life led by Sufis attracted common, poor people to them. Secondly, Sufis encouraged dialogue about religion and resolved religious queries of newly converted Muslims using a judicious mix of humour, anecdotes and scripture. This was more acceptable to a population subjected to what was effectively, a religion of foreigners. Thirdly, Sufis learned the local languages and dialects and thus were able to acquaint people with the teachings of Quran in a way that Arabic, Turkic or Persian speaking Maulvis could not. Fourthly, their indomitable zeal for proselytization coupled with their generous donations for the poor folk turned them into revered figures. Lastly, unlike the 'Ulama' or the traditional Islamic scholars and preachers, the Sufis did not differentiate between a foreign-born Muslim and a local convert, which was very much the norm in case of orthodox Muslims.

How Sufism influenced and led to the emergence of the Baul

Upendranath Bhattacharya believes that the association between Sufism and Baul is superficial and there is not much connection or borrowing between their ideology or

practice (Bhattacharya 1957). According to him, there are three principal areas of similarity between the two. The first of these is the belief that the supreme being resides in the body of man and the man is but an image of the supreme. Secondly, there is the important belief that worship is not about steadfast observation of a set of rituals, neither is it merely a way to placate certain Gods or a God to ensure a good afterlife. Sufi as well as Baul worship stresses upon the fact that worship is just a way to reach self-realisation. To elaborate, this self-realisation is realising that the soul of man is not different from the supreme. The ultimate stage of Sufi and Baul worship (the stage of Fana Fil-Lah or simply Fana) is a stage of pleasure-filled unity with the supreme. Thirdly, both the Sufis and Bauls stress on rejecting all unnecessary rituals (ibid).

According to Bhattacharya, mention of different 'Mokam', i.e., stages of self-realisation such as 'Nachut', 'Malkut', 'Jabrut' and 'Lahut' in Baul songs doesn't prove that they understand these concepts in a similar way as the Sufis. Bauls have mixed the concept of Mokam with their own body-centric concepts. According to Bhattacharya, this is a sign of their imperfect understanding of Sufism (ibid).

Despite this statement, Bhattacharya later elucidated on some more similarities between the two. Sufis accept the authority of Quran. However, they are prone to find a dual meaning in its verses. The outward or obvious meaning which is understood by the Ulama and taught to the common people is called Jahir. The hidden meaning, which apparently speaks of mysticism is called Batin. There is a further belief that the verses of the 'revealed' Quran is not the whole of that holy book. According to Sufi beliefs, the original and complete book resides in heaven, guarded by angels. The book contains as many as three times the number of verses available in the commonly accepted Quran. The rest of the verses were taught to Nabi Muhammad and he kept it a secret. He only imparted this knowledge to those who were closest to him including his daughter Fatima and his nephew Hazrat Ali. It is this secret Quran which apparently informs the teaching and practices of Sufis (ibid).
The concept of 'Mokam' or level of spiritual success that a follower of the mystical path has achieved, is a common concept in Sufism as well as among Bauls and Fakirs. The five 'Mokam' or stages as described by the Sufis are- Alm-I-Nachut (this is the lowest Mokam, the level where the uninitiated common people exist). The second Mokam is Alm-i-Malkut.

This is a state which the angels enjoy. A Sufi, upon reaching this stage is able to leave impious thought and work and always praise his Lord. The third Mokam is Alm-i-Jabrut. This is a stage where the practitioner realizes the great power and wonders of the lord and realizes that same greatness within oneself. The fourth stage is the most coveted stage for Sufis, this is called Alm-i-Lahut. When a practitioner reaches this stage, he is finally able to fully immerse himself in the 'Dhat' or true nature of God. Filled with divine pleasure, the Sufi at this stage can say things which otherwise be considered gravely blasphemous. For example- the famous Sufi Mansur Hallaj declared upon reaching this stage, 'Ana-l-Haq' (I am Allah), Sibli stated, 'It is I who speaks and I who listens, there is no one else in this world but I' (Bhattacharya 1957). the fifth and highest Mokam is called Alm-i-Haut. This is a stage which is beyond thought, imagination and expression. This is considered the primary state of the whole creation as manifested by the supreme. A true Sufi does not wish to remain in this state for it is beyond the feelings of love for God as well which they cherish above all.

Bhattacharya, through this analysis of many songs of Lalon and Panju Shah has claimed that although these illustrious Fakirs often mentioned the Sufi Mokams in their songs but their understanding of these seem to be limited and incongruent with classical Sufi teachings. For example- in one of Panju Shah's songs referenced by Bhattacharya, which is the 254th song of Panju Shah, he states that Noor or the divine light of Allah plays a divine orchestra in Haut or Alm-i-Haut. This does not correspond with the Sufi interpretation of Haut which is a state of absolute stillness and oneness with God (ibid). In fact, the songs of Bauls and Fakirs also contain a radically different interpretation of the concept of Noor which is essential to the Sufis. Bauls and Fakirs define Noor as another expression of their all-encompassing religious concern for retaining semen and thereby achieving a state where the supreme is both immanent and transcendent. Upendranath's rejection of Sufi influence on Bauls was premised on his firm belief that Bauls originated from the Sahajiya Vaishnavas alone. Shaktinath Jha, who has focussed on the Muslim Bauls or Fakirs of Murshidabad presents a broader picture of religious harmony and Sufi influence on Bauls. According to Jha, Sufis were closely associated with the Shias although a section of Shia Muslims in Iran believe that Iman Ali was against Sufis (Jha 1999). This Shias believe in a more than literal interpretation of Quran was the original point of similarity between Sufis

and Shia Muslims. A section of Sufis, who did not accept the primacy of Sharia were known as 'Besra' (Be-Sharia or without Sharia) and they received almost universal condemnation from all major Muslim sects. Jha states that Besra Sufis found many similarities with the folk religions of India. In fact, such religious beliefs started influencing the Sufis even before the establishment of Mamluk Sultanate in Delhi. Eventually many independent and distinctly Indian Sufi Tariqa developed. Sufism, even the so called 'Besra' or 'Bedati' Sufism which was the most radical and did not adhere to Sharia, found solid ground. Akbar and Dara-Shikoh were patrons of Sufis of all orders (ibid). Aurangzeb's reign was a dark phase in the history of Besra Sufis. However, imperial repression could not eradicate them and these Sufis survived hiding in the remote parts of the empire and continued preaching there. According to Jha, imperial repression led to the minority Shias and Besra Sufis attempted to build a 'third society' by aligning with similar radical groups in the Hindu society. However, when this attempt failed, these dissenting groups remained within the folds of their formal religion and continued to practice their formal religion while practicing their own form of worship in secret. This later movement led to the creation of secretive groups like the Baul and the Fakir (ibid). The result of such connections and cultural exchanges at the lower end of the social spectrum led to easy assimilation of each other's beliefs. Satyapir and Manikpir are worshipped by both common Hindus and Muslims of Bengal who consider them Pirs as well as local protector gods. Indian Sufis started writing songs and religious texts in their respective regional languages. Therefore, we find Sufi texts describing Indian yogic practices such as Gaus' 'Amrita Kunda' and Abu Hamid's 'Kitabul Irshad' (Chakraborty 2009). Ajodhya became a centre of Sufis such as Abdul Hamid and Mir Abdul Wahid whose thoughts represent a fusion of Hindu Gods and Quran's angels. Some of the Sufis forged a close relationship with the Nath Sampradaya. Shaikh Farid, Nizamuddin Awliya and many other prominent Sufis took to vegetarianism due to their close contact with the Nath yogis. Chishti, Naqshbandi and Sattari Sufis became particularly close to many Hindu sects. This was not a one-way interaction. Farsi (Persian) language were widely taught among Hindus as it was the court language and important Sufi texts written in Farsi such Rumi's 'Masnavi' were widely read and appreciated by the learned Hindus. In fact, before the establishment of British rule, it was considered customary for a learned Hindu to have knowledge of the Persian language as well as these famous Sufi texts (ibid).

Sufis not only accepted the Hindu yogic practices, especially the techniques for breath control, but they also learnt magic and Ayurveda from India. Along with these, they adopted the use of Marijuana and other hallucinogens used by Indian yogis to reach a meditative state. This diffusion of culture reached such a level that Ismaili Sufis preached that Imam Ali was the tenth avatar of Vishnu (Haq 1975). They also found cosmic links between Adam and Shiva and Muhammad and Brahma! Hululi Sufis accepted the doctrine of the immortality of soul and reincarnation. Naqshbandi Sufis put serious emphasis on the use of Marijuana and women in their sadhana. This process, over time, led to clear fault lines between the Sharia abiding Sufis and the more 'Indianized' Sufis. The later, although originally hailing from old and Sharia-abiding Tariqa, eventually broke away and formed their own religious centres or Khanaqahs (ibid). All such Sufis were termed 'Be-Sharia' or 'Besra' by the conservative Muslims. Besra Sufis eventually established their own Dehasadhana practices and came even closer to the Sahajiya Vaishnavas. According to Jha, the practice of using women as a means of Sadhana was common for the Tantrics and Kapalikas before the Islamic and Vaishnava Sahajiyas adopted the practice. However, a key difference between the Tantrics and the Sahajiyas was that the Sahajiyas treated women with respect and even considered them to be natural Gurus for men as a practitioner can't learn the art of Dehasadhana without one. Tantrics, on the other hand, regarded women merely as a tool or a medium (Jha 1999).

Currents of History and imperial politics affected the life and sadhana of Baul and Fakirs as much as impacted the common people. The spread of Baul and Fakirs in Bengal, especially in eastern Bengal where Fakirs could be seen in large numbers before the fundamentalist Islamic purges was also a result of this imperial politics. While it is already established that early Sufi preachers took the lead in spreading Islam and imperial power to the furthest corners of Bengal, the later diffusion of Besra Sufis among Bengali people and their eventual conversion to the today's Baul-Fakirs have not been adequately studied. Jha opines that the defeat of Jaunpur's Sultan in the hands of Bengals' Sultan Hussein Shah led to the coming of many later-era Sufis to Bengal who carried with them Sufism-influenced texts and poems such as Padumabat of Jayesi (Haq 1975). These later Sufis found prominence in the court of Arakan where Sayyad Sultan Sufi, Ali Raja, Muhammad Khan

etc. translated these texts in Bengali as well as wrote their own. These were the first attempts at translating the works of Rumi and Hafiz into an Indian regional language. Jha states that since Gaur-Pandua became the centre of Muslim rule, the Sufis located there eventually became too entangled in politics. Therefore, for a section of Sufis who were more spiritual in nature, Chittagong and Dhaka proved to be more important centres. Eventually, Sufism spread from these centres to lower Bengal's delta regions where a tradition of Sahajiya Vaishnavism was already existing. Forever outside the pale of Aryan civilization and Brahminical religion, the inhabitants of lower Bengal were mostly of low, untouchable castes (Jha 1999). They adhered to gurus who had a tradition of 'rasa-sadhana'. Jha mentions that tradition of Narottam's family, who were disciples of the Sudra guru Loknath, and who became hereditary gurus of these castes in that area. They believed firmly in the efficacy of magical treatments and healing. This social and religious situation was conductive for the amalgamation of Sufis with Sahajiya Vaishnavism and eventually led to the emergence of Baul-Fakirs who are still found in large numbers in this region.

Another immensely important political event which led to deeper penetration of Sufis in the rural interiors of Bengal was Sanyasi-Fakir rebellion which took place on the eve of the establishment of British rule in Bengal. Certain schools of Sufis such as the Chishti and Qalandar already had a tradition of carrying arms and assisting Sultan's armies in battle. Now, under immense financial strain caused by the diarchy imposed by the East India Company and loss of their rent-free lands, they rebelled against the British rule. After the British suppressed this rebellion violently, these Fakirs had to take shelter in the obscure villages (Wayahab 1999). That is why one can still observe a large number of 'Mazars' of unknown pir-Fakirs in remote villages of Bengal. Cut off from their Tariqa and their original khanaqahs and forced to live with mostly lower caste Hindus, these Sufis became more inward looking in their worship and assimilation of thoughts with the Sahajiyas became easier (Jha 1999). It can be said then, that the Sanyasi-Fakir rebellion was a major cause behind the emergence of Fakirs, who were descendants of the aforementioned Sufis who fully accepted Dehasadhana in their exile and eventually became linked with the Bauls.

Another factor which contributed significantly to the acceptance of Sufi Preachers among the poor Hindus and eventually led to the development of a Baul religious way was the

dietary habit of the Sufis. Dietary habits constitute an integral part of one's religious identity in rural Bengal. For example, a true Vaishnava will endure great hardship but not partake meat of any kind. Eating beef is another issue which causes frequent tension among the Hindu and Muslim communities living side by side. Many Sufi Tariqas advocated vegetarian food and some went to the extent of advocating non-use of onion and garlic citing references from the prophet's life or Sunna where it is mentioned that the prophet did not use onion or garlick and forbade Muslims to go to Masjid for Namaj if they have eaten these. During a survey conducted between 1977-1982, covering 218 Baul-Fakir families, Shaktinath Jha found that out of these, only hundred families ate meat and not a single family ate beef (Jha 1999). Even egg is consumed by only 83 families out of these 218. Fish is not considered to be non-vegetarian food and therefore, it is freely consumed. The food habit of Muslim Baul-Fakirs is thus, drastically different from the Sharia-obeying Muslims of the area who freely consume beef and other meat. This stance regarding food taken by Muslim Baul-Fakirs is undoubtedly an adaptation which helped them to forge closer ties with their Hindu neighbours and provided protection from governmental or religious retributions. Local availability of food must have also influenced the habit of early Muslim Bauls, as exemplified by the inclusion of fish in diet, which is not found among Sufi orders anywhere else. Rejection of beef is a very serious matter of faith for Muslim Bauls, one which can cause very considerable problems in the conservative rural society. Jha narrates the story of one Ibrahim Fakir of Durgapur village, Murshidabad who faced systematic persecution from local Maulvis and opportunistic political leaders who wanted to uproot what they viewed as aberrations from the Shariati Muslim society (Jha 2014). Ibrahim Fakir's long hair (every Fakir is required to keep all hairs on his body) was shaved off and beef was forcibly shoved in his mouth to make him a 'true' Muslim (ibid). The threat of forceful feeding of beef by conservative Muslims has led to some Fakirs and Bauls to flee their ancestral homes in Murshidabad.

Hindu and Muslim Bauls found further common ground in their attitude towards material wealth. Neither the Hindu Baul nor the Muslim Fakir is an ascetic in the vein of the Dashnami sadhus of India. Baul-Fakir gurus are commonly called 'Sadhu' by their disciples but they neither leave their households nor do they solely rely on the generosity of their followers. Most Baul-Fakirs are householders and engage in agriculture or other financially

rewarding activities. However, it is forbidden for a Baul to become greedy and save more than required for fulfilling basic needs. Although there is a tradition of 'Khilafat' among Muslim Bauls which entails the performance of funeral rites of a newly initiated Fakir by himself and draping him in the clothes used for final rites. Afterwards, the novice is sent to the village for ritual begging. It proves that begging must have once been an important economic activity for Fakirs. However, surveys conducted by Jha proves that a large majority of Bauls in the Nadia-Murshidabad region are landowning farmers; constituting approximately 75% of the sample size (Jha 1999). The rest are landless labourers and small business owners. This drive for economic self-sufficiency unites both Hindu and Muslim Bauls and separates them from traditional Vaishnava mendicants. Another common factor found among the Hindu and Muslim Bauls is their negative attitude towards bearing offspring. In many Baul groups, having children is considered a failure on the part of the Baul in his Dehasadhana which puts supreme importance on the retention of semen during physical union. Despite this general attitude, many Bauls, Hindu and Muslim alike, are seen to be having children. Baul marriages are unlike normal marriages. Here, the man and woman of the household act as each other's companion in sadhana and such companions can be changed when it pleases a partner. In such a situation, bearing children is indeed problematic but considering the possibility of the very human weaknesses on the part of a Baul, many gurus permit their disciple couples to have one child after they have progressed somewhat in their sadhana. Children of Baul have no compulsion of becoming Bauls and can take up any profession they like (ibid).

The steadfast rejection of Bauls to observe many Shariati rituals undoubtedly takes them closer to their Hindu counterparts. Among the 218 families surveyed by Jha (Jha 1999), only 32 sometimes visit the local mosque for Namaj. The same number of families observe Roja or fasting during the Ramadan month. Bauls do not feel the need to go on a Hajj and instead declare that the real Mecca and Kabbah is within the human body. Only 15 among these families follow the right of 'Korbani' or slaughtering of animals during Eid-ul-Adha. Instead, a fair number among them follow Hindu rituals such as using Durba grass and paddy as sacred objects, using turmeric paste on holy occasions. Their women often wear vermillion and sport conch shell bangles like other Hindu women. A large majority of Bauls interpret the rituals of Korbani and Zakat from their own religious standpoint and consider

establishing control over one's own desire (Kama) as the best form of Korbani (Jha 2014). They interpret the Kalema and Namaj, two core elements of the Muslim identity, in a similar fashion. A Baul considers that offering Namaj without realising that Allah resides inside every man and that there is no supernatural Allah, is not worship at all but mere physical exercise. However, to avoid persecution, Bauls often act like a believing Muslim and perform Namaj without assigning any importance to it (ibid). Jha states that most Baul families identify more with the Shias than the Sunnis and actively participate in the Shia festivals like Muharram. The Nawabs of Murshidabad were Shias, which might partially explain why such a large number of Bauls adhered to the Shia sect. Being a follower of the ruler's sect must have provided some protection from the fanatics. The extraordinary fusion of Hindu and Muslim faith in the Baul faith is exemplified through the findings of Jha's survey where out of 218 Baul families, almost an equal number of families claimed to follow Muhammad, Ali, Chaitanya and Kali (Jha 1999).

Sudhir Chakraborty is another scholar who has performed intensive field study on the Bauls and Fakirs of Nadia and Murshidabad and presented his findings along with his scholarly and riveting commentary in his book 'Baul-Phakir Katha' (Chakraborty 2009). There are a few words of caution which one must keep in mind though, before he can commence a perusal of Chakraborty's account. Most of his field studies were performed between the seventh and eighth decade of the last century. Therefore, not all of his observations stand true today. Despite this, his intimate observations and sympathetic commentary on Fakir life is both engrossing and important because he explored the themes of caste-like divisions the Bengali Muslim society as well as the socio-economic aspect of the Fakir identity. Chakraborty alleged that researchers, academicians and educated Bengalis have not paid as much attention to the Fakirs as they have the Bauls. Although a few organizations such as the Baul Fakir Sangha headed by Jha or the leftist 'Loksanskriti o Adivasi Kendra' are playing active roles in researching and supporting the Fakirs, they are still very much the outliers in their own rural society as much as they are in the urbane environment of Kolkata and Shanti Niketan. Fakirs live a precarious existence. They don't follow the Sharia in its entirety, refuse to accept the authority of the local Maulvi and reject his instructions about regular attendance in the mosque. Moreover, they refuse to eat meat and despite facing many threats, sing publicly. Thus, they break the laws of Sharia according to the

conservative Muslims. But more than any of the activities listed above, it is the rationalistic attitude of the Fakir which refuses to accept religious dictates without questioning them with logic and their steadfast refusal to accept any God who is beyond the understanding of human senses, which absolutely infuriates the local ill-educated fanatical protectors of the faith. In the humble Fakir, they see the seeds of destruction of their authority over the rural folk. Therefore, they teach the common Muslims to despise Fakirs. Sadly, despite all the hatred that a Fakir faces from his Muslim neighbours, he often has no recourse but to stay with them as he bears a Muslim name and it is hard for someone with a Muslim name to find accommodation and livelihood in a Hindu locality. Further, the Fakir is often tied to his land and cannot simply leave his ancestral village. Lastly, Fakirs fear that if they are completely alienated from the local Muslim society, then there will be no one ready to establish conjugal relations with their children. Chakrabarty thus points out some major differences in the mode of social existence between Bauls and Fakirs (Chakrabarty 2009). However, religious differences and animosities are not to be entirely blamed for the apparent invisibility and obscurity of Fakirs in popular Bengali cultural scene, in stark contrast to the Bauls. Fakirs are by definition, introverts who have no desire for fame or money. However, they are not renunciates. Fakirs usually live the life of a common, poor householder with a small house, some land and a host of sickly children. Chakrabarty elaborates on this critical difference between Baul and Fakirs. While it is not absolutely forbidden for Bauls to have progeny, but it is heavily frowned upon. A Baul sadhak having many children loses the respect of fellow Bauls who consider his sadhana to be corrupt or incomplete. Although the Fakirs practice 'Dehasadhana' which is supposed to provide control over desires, they are not generally forbidden from having children. This may be a reason for the noticeably more poverty seen among Fakirs than the Bauls. To come back to the question of the Fakir's obscurity being largely of his own making, one can refer to a favourite adage of the Fakirs; 'Fakirer Kono Fikir Nei'- i.e., a Fakir can't have any desire for material things and success (ibid). 'Fikir' means dishonesty. To succeed in this world, a person has to adopt unfair means at times. Since it is against the belief and teaching of Fakirs to take this route, they live a secretive and marginal life, embracing their poverty.

Liaqat Ali, who worked a s research assistant of Sudhir Chakrabarty, focused on the reasons behind the continuing acrimony between the Shariati leaders like the Maulvis, Aleem and

Hafez and the Fakirs. Going beyond the simplistic explanation that this acrimony stems from mere doctrinal differences, Chakrabarty elucidates on the socio-economic basis of the village's power structure (Chakraborty 2014). Fakirs, unlike Bauls, seldom survive solely on alms received as rewards for their singing performances. Singing is an essential part of a Fakir's meditation and worship. The songs are tools for his worship. For Bauls, singing is both a part of their sadhana and his 'Duniyadari' i.e., the outward appearance that he keeps and the persona which helps him to sustain himself. Baul's attractive singing and dancing, his flamboyant clothing- all these are attempts to earn a living as well as to cover his inner and secretive life from the prying eyes of the researchers and common middle class educated people who are taking an inordinate amount of interest in everything associated with Bauls. Fakirs, on the other hand, mix with the common village folk much more openly and take up common jobs as farmers, rickshaw-pullers and day labourers. They don't advertise their songs, they don't dance while singing and wear traditional white clothes that is given to them by their Murshid or guru (the white dress usually consists Khelka-Piran-Tahband-Taj or innerwear, outer garment and headdress) (ibid). This dress is similar to the final dress draped on a corpse before burial. Thus, a Fakir's initiation by wearing the dress of the deceased ritually frees him from all rules and responsibilities of society (ibid). By wearing this simple dress, forsaking the use of modern musical instruments and avoiding the limelight, the Fakirs hide in plain sight from urban intruders.

The difference between contemporary Sufi Pirs and Fakirs

There is a group of Muslims in contemporary Bengal who go by the name of Pir or Sufi but they are very far from the Fakir identity, who themselves claim the lineage of some Sufi Tariqa or use Sufi religious terminology. These contemporary Pirs and Sufis of Bengal are aggressively conservative. Although their entire legitimacy as leaders of Muslim society stems from their descent from some famous Sufi preacher whose shrine they maintain (an act which amounts to grave-worshipping, something forbidden according to the more conservative explanations of Islam), they do their utmost to persecute Fakirs. The leaders of some of the most famous Sufi shrines of Bengal such as the Furfura Sharif, played an important part in the persecution of Fakirs (Jha 2014).

A sincere Muslim accepts the five pillars of Islam namely, Kalema (Declaration that Allah has no equal and the Muhammad is his last messenger), Namaj (the daily ritual worship of Allah), Roja (Fasting during daytime during Ramadan months), Zakat (Donating at least $1/40^{th}$ of one's surplus income for the poor), and Hajj (the once in a lifetime to Mecca during a particular month). These five pillars are also called 'Panchbena' by Bengali Muslims. Those Muslims who do not abide by these five cardinal principles are often labelled as 'Mushrik' or 'Bedin' by the observing Muslims (ibid). Fakirs become prime targets for such labelling because not only do they not accept the five pillars but they openly ridicule these 'outward' show of devotion prized by the Maulvis. Sufis in contemporary Bengal (known as Pir or Pirzada) tread a careful middle path regarding these religious duties. Although there exists those Pirs who follow an extremely puritanical form of Islam as discussed before but a section of them is far less radical (ibid). They preach that following the Sharia is important and no diversion from it may be allowed in normal day to day activities. However, there is more to religion than simply following the Sharia. Sufis stress on the heart of the believer which must always lovingly turn to Allah as a friend and guide. This way of the heart and love is termed 'Tariqa' by Sufis. Similar to the five pillars of Sharia, Tariqa also incorporates three duties. A Sufi must do 'Dhikr', which is chanting the name of Allah in every breath and meditating upon it (Haq 1975). This is similar to the 'Japa' done by Hindus to meditate. The second duty is to establish 'Rabita' or a personal connection with God through devotion which can only be achieved through a master or a guru. The third duty is to purify one's mind through Dhikr and Rabita to an extent where one can destroy one's ego completely to be one with the divine light or 'Noor' of Allah- a stage called 'Murakkibah'. This stage again has two levels; at the first level where the Sufi has managed to destroy his ego and able to enjoy the Noor, is called 'Fana-Fillah'. The final stage where the Sufi is truly one with Allah is called 'Bakkah-Billah' (Jha 1999). These Arabic terms are often simplified by Bengali Sufis as 'Fana' and 'Baka'. Sufis are not entirely against singing but their chosen form of Music, called 'Sama', is performed without musical instruments and the style of singing resembles recital of Quran. The subject of Sama is usually divine love. Certain Sufi shrines endorse 'Qawwali' music which is much more boisterous but never veers so far from Sharia that amounts to a challenge. The only point of serious contention between the Sufis and Shariatis arise regarding the veneration of graves of past Sufi masters. Pir families also perform healing magic (Jal-Para, Tel-Para)

and supposedly fight off evil spirits or 'Djinn' for their 'Murid' or followers (ibid). These practices again amount to 'Shirk' or anti-Islamic idolatry, according to puritanical interpretations. The Pirs know that they can't continue their profitable livelihood if they fall foul of the Shariati leaders who have increased in number and strength in Bengal since the nineteenth century. Therefore, these Pirs found another group of Muslims (Fakir) who could be identified as a much greater evil because of their open ridiculing of the Sharia and its' five pillars. A Fakir sees absolutely no merit in these practices. He may even go against the first and most important pillar of all, the Kalema Tayyab which declares the supremacy and uniqueness of Allah. The Fakir says 'Jo hi Murshid so hi Khuda' (ibid). This means the mentor or master is equal to Allah. This is an assertion worthy of universal condemnation from Muslims. But not stopping there, they go on to explain to their disciples or 'Bayed' that none can reach Allah by observing Roja as fasting during the day and eating after sundown is meaningless self-mortification that even a bat follows out of habit. They ridicule the Aleem and Hafez Muslims (those who have memorised the whole Quran) by stating that even a trained parrot can recite verses from the Quran without ever understanding the meaning of the text. They believe and preach that there is no fixed hour for the worship of Allah. Every minute of every hour can be spent in his worship. Therefore, they don't respect the call for Namaj emanating from a mosque and instead ask their followers to perform 'Dayemi Namaj' which is performed along with controlled breathing throughout the day. They term the communal Namaj held in mosques to be 'Jaheri Namaj' or an outward show of religiosity (Chakraborty 2014). This leads them to eschew the local mosque completely which results in serious antagonism between Fakirs and Maulvis. The Fakir's criticism of Hajj is particularly interesting from an economic standpoint. Hajj is a terribly costly endeavour even today that requires being away from one's home or place of work for long periods of time. It is impossible for common Muslims, most of whom are poor small farmers or landless labourers to either save up the kind of money required for Hajj or to be away from their land for so long. The Fakirs therefore, preach that Hajj is only an opportunity for rich Muslims to flaunt their wealth and gain even more social prestige as a 'Haji'.

Having thus sowed a seed of doubt in the minds of potential followers, the Fakir goes on to explain the core teachings of their way- that is, Dehatatwa. Since it is not possible for poor labourers to arrive five times a day to the mosque for Namaj, the Fakir Guru or Murshid

provides the easier alternative of focussing on the aforementioned Dayemi Namaj. He sings – 'Namaj Amar Hoilo a Aday, Bisham Khannater Daye' (I Could not offer Namaj today as dire wants have engulfed me) (Chakraborty 2009).Elaborating his theory, the Murshid teaches that the poor man is not going to be deprived of the blessings of Allah simply because he is unable to go to Mecca for Hajj. Murshid teaches that since Allah is everywhere, so he must also reside in the body of man. Therefore, the body of the disciple contains Mecca which can be reached through the Fakiri sadhana as taught by the Murshid. This third way, distinct from the way of the Sharia-obeying Muslim (Momin), as well as from the way of the traditional Sufis (Tariqa) is the way of 'Marfat', which is the way of the Fakirs. Presented in a simple and sympathetic way with an unrefusable basis of logic, accompanied by beautiful and meaningful songs, the Fakir Murshid manages to gather a large following from the working-class rural Muslims (ibid).

An exploration of the life and ideologies of Fakirs and Bauls proves that they both live a dual life where they participate in the regular events and rituals of their respective societies but always jealously guard the inner world of their beliefs. Although, a comparative study of both Baul and Fakirs seems to reveal that the inner world of the Fakirs is more complex than the Baul's and it is definitely more challenging to hide that world from detractors.

The commodification of Baul-Fakir Songs

Baul songs (and Fakiri songs) are not only a medium of expression for them but their very life. A discussion on the Baul-Fakirs is incomplete without an attempt to view their songs critically as expressions of a lived socio-political reality. Such a discussion must also touch upon the themes of modernity and cultural globalisation. From the middle of the ninth decade of the last century, 'popular culture' as understood by the Bengali middle class was undergoing a sea change. As the country was liberalising, the youth was gaining unprecedented access to the dominant western culture through films and music. Availability of internet was essentially changing the way music as entertainment was perceived. Earlier forms of music consumption, costing considerable money, time and energy to acquire music retained its' status as art that was the preserve of a select few. Availability of easily downloadable and transferrable music in bulk reduced music to the status of cheap

commodity and the younger generation became its chief consumer, rather than the well to do middle age Bengalis. Since downloading music illegally was free and totally without legal consequences, playback music became a secondary source of income and live performances became the primary source of income for musicians and singers. The age and taste of their most important patrons, the college-going generation therefore, started determining how popular music would be written and performed. Whereas earlier, the stage performances usually entailed famous playback singers or their voice-alike singing hit film songs or the occasional 'Puja Special' songs for a largely family-oriented audience, the new performers had to perform before a crowd of raucous teen-aged students from middle and upper-middle income families. With the establishment of many private colleges and general increase in disposable income of the parents of these students, their capacity to spend for and contribute to, an annual festival of music, alcohol and other revelry in the form of a 'college fest' grew. A large number of these students hailed from families where wealth was new and cultural aspirations were not surefooted. This generation neither had the time nor the interest for sophistry and perfection which drove the older generation towards more classical forms of music. Being children of a different era, they also lacked the fire of their immediate predecessors for whom music represented dissent, revolution and sometimes, universal brotherhood. The 90's generation were children of globalisation and at the same time, they were still strongly tied to their cultural identity. The new age performers needed something which could instantly connect with this generation and they found folk songs- especially Baul songs, extremely useful for this purpose.

That is not to say that modernisation of Baul song's lyrics, musical arrangement and ways of performances were immune to change before capital finally caught up with them. As early as the seventh decade of the last century, both Shaktinath Jha and Sudhir Chakrabarty stated that gentrification of Shanti Niketan, invasion of white-skinned enthusiasts in search of a fantastical India full of meditating Yogis and mystics were slowly turning Bauls into consummate performers. They were eschewing traditional Dehatatwa songs in favour of more easily understandable songs. They were freely borrowing from the vast treasury of Bengal's folk music such as Jhumur, Dhamail and Vatiali. Thus, the originality of Baul songs were being lost. At a later period, the government started taking interest in Baul songs. Besides being the perfect showpiece of Bengal's much touted secularism and

inclusivity, the Bauls presented an excellent opportunity for the government to spread the message for different governmental schemes to villagers who loved Baul songs. Thus, government- patronised Bauls started writing songs about literacy, family planning and eve thalassemia prevention! However, there is a crucial difference between these non-religious songs of a real Baul, i.e., one initiated into the Baul way of sadhana and a person who is simply 'acting' as a Baul on stage for money. A 'real' Baul, as is typical of his faith, considers the performance as a necessary trick so that he can continue with his secret sadhana, which is his real concern. A 'Saja Baul' or one who has simply donned the attire of a Baul for a performance is very different from this 'Sadhak Baul' (Author fieldnotes 2019). However, there was still an important point of similarity, i.e., their belief that in order to sing a Baul song, one at least should look and act like one. In other words, Baul song was not disconnected from the Baul identity. The contemporary performers of Baul songs are completely different from these earlier performers in that they feel no need to represent the Baul identity while singing their songs. Some of the popular songs, including some Dehatatwa songs are now so well known that they are often performed by professional bands who turn the songs into hit numbers (Author fieldnotes 2019). The foot-tapping beat infused into songs of Bauls provide great recall value for its young clientele who find familiarity and comfort in the fact that something so unmistakably rural and homely is finding so much popularity in the urban space.

The performers of such songs usually make it a point to include elements of rural life and the Baul identity in their songs such as a purely ornamental 'Ektara' (one stringed musical instrument used by Bauls) or a tailor-made checkered jacket, imitating the attire of a Dervish. However, they are unapologetic about their non-Baul identity and view themselves as rockstars of a very western kind rather than as a Baul sadhak focusing on his secret practice of Charchandra or Dam-Dhikr. This dissociation of Baul songs and Baul religious beliefs was a significant cultural event of 20th century Bengal. The acceptance of the fact by the urban viewer and consumer that Baul songs can be sung and even 'remixed' by people who have absolutely no connection to the Baul sadhana or elements of the Baul identity; that these acts can be done without an attempt to even falsely claim a Baul lineage (which is often resorted to by the Jat-Vaishnavas and Kirtan performers of the Rarh region

of Bengal) is a solid blow to the introvert Baul-sadhak who now represent a small and hard-to-find minority in an ocean of Baul singers.

Chapter Three

The Matuas of Bengal: Their Origin, Beliefs and Social Position

The Matuas are a group of Bengali speaking people traditionally engaged as cultivators, fishermen and boatmen belonging to the lowly *Namashudra* caste who are followers of the late nineteenth century reformer Harichand Thakur who lived in Orakandi, a village situated in Gopalganj district of the Dhaka division of Bangladesh. Following the partition of Bengal and in the aftermath of the 1971 war, a large number of them have migrated to the border districts of Nadia and Twenty-four Parganas of West Bengal along with a section of Harichnad Thakur's descendants who founded a new religious center at Thakurnagar in North Twenty-four Parganas. Despite their ubiquity, they are still a largely unknown entity to the upper castes. Many, in the safe confines of their homes, refer to them merely as a group of *'chotolok'*, i.e., non-elite low caste people who offend the cultural sensibilities of the elite with their 'wild' war-drum beating, unruly processions and ecstatic dance which they perform during their religious festivals. The rural conservative elite also feel mortified by the open participation of women in such activities when in reality, the revolutionary attitude of the Matuas who accept the equality of women in social and religious matters as a matter of creed is reflected in such participation.

When viewed from a sociological perspective, it is alluring to classify the Matuas as a subaltern group. However, such an understanding presupposes that 'subaltern' is an identity, in contrast to how Spivak defined it as a 'relational position in a conceptualization of power,..a space without identity' (Pandey 2006). On the other hand, Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies Project (SSP) in general, have taken a view where the subaltern appears as the archetypical figure of the third world peasant; illiterate, superstitious, isolated and non-political (Pandey 2006). This makes the subaltern merely a 'subject' without agency. Imposition of such an identity overlooks the modernity and complexity of the peasant as well as the third world itself vis a vis the west. The peasant can't really exist frozen in time as a completely self-contained unit. There is no 'requirement' for him to undergo a transformative process whereby he becomes a part of the organized labour force and acquires political agency (Ibid). He can be part peasant and part worker, rotating freely

between a rural and an urban identity as per his needs. As the political history of the Matuas reveals, they perfectly encapsulate this dynamic nature of the subaltern and transcend the conceptual straightjacket of how South Asian subaltern is supposed to behave. However, it is important to clarify that *Namashudra* as a caste and Matua as a group belonging to that caste merits different treatment from a sociological point of view. Harichand Thakur inspired a section of the *Namashudras* to break free from the shackles of Brahmanism, reject mediation of Brahmin priests in matters of worship, forego pilgrimages, reject the prevalent customs related to purity and pollution and become financially self-sufficient (Biswas, 2015). Thus, he created a group which did not conform to the Gramscian concept of subalternity whereby the 'native consciousness' of the subaltern mind must be secondary to an imposed 'alien consciousness' which is the consciousness of the ruling class (Patrick 2003).

Not only do the Matuas challenge the subaltern identity, but they are also hard to classify as a group. Membership in the group is based mostly on birth and acquired memberships are rare and often cause friction in the group. In that sense, the group behaves like a caste. However, unlike a caste group, they don't follow a strict set of rules regarding marriage and commensality. Unlike a *Jati*, they are not tied to any traditional profession. They are different from other Scheduled Castes like Rajbanshi or Koch of Bengal as well because they do not present a political demand based on a distinct political history, premised ultimately on ethnic differences. It is also problematic to classify them as a 'Sect'. Sect is defined in the sociology of religion as a set of beliefs followed by a group of people where there is a clear tension between those beliefs and that of the mainstream or major religion from which that sect has sprung but broadly, the sect's teachings and ideas remain within the boundaries of the principal religion. Sects also usually have an ascetic founder who is a historical figure. This definition of a sect is a western notion though and is inadequate in fully explaining the religious groups of India which identify as Hindu. For example, the *Ravidasis* or *Kabirpanthi*s will definitely qualify as a sect according to this definition but it will be more problematic to accommodate the Lingayats or Vira Shaivas of Karnataka (Bayly, 1988). They consider Vishnu worship as an abomination, while identifying as religious Hindus. In the same vein, it is hard to classify Matuas as a *Bhakti* sect as there is considerable debate among the Matuas themselves regarding the nature of their beliefs.

There is a vocal group of ambedkarites among them who view 'Matua' as a distinct religion and as a revival of a supposedly glorious Buddhist past (Walker, 1999) while a large number of lay Matuas think of Harichand Thakur as a reincarnation of Chaitanya Deva and an *Avatara* of Vishnu. The Matua identity is therefore, a contested one which is evolving with the Matua consciousness. It is certainly not monolithic and does not seem subaltern.

Subaltern is not just a conceptual category, though. It is always a political state as well. In the Indian context, the political in subaltern is generally identified through the politics of the depressed castes or *Dalits*, who has been the focus of Indian politics since the nineties. Despite this, caste has often been treated as an insignificant and indeed, outmoded object of research pertaining to the society and politics of West Bengal in the post-independence period. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has pointed out that such an outlook is a testimony to the survival of colonial and orientalist sociology in vogue in British India which viewed the caste system entirely through the prism of Hindu religion (Bandyopadhyay, 2004). Even modern structural sociologists like Louis Dumont, who accepted separation and functional differences as two major planks of the caste system, ultimately resorted to explaining it as a simple hierarchy based on a scale of purity and pollution determined by the Hindu religion and failed to properly distinguish between *'Varna'* and *'Jati'*. The *Jati*, a sub-stratum of a caste based on differentiation of work, is of much more contemporary relevance than the Vedic Varna system which was already quite ineffectual as an organizing principle of the Indian society by the time the British arrived. However, they found it a familiar and convenient reference point in grasping the complexity of the Indian system, hence the colonial scholarship's focus on caste as a clear subset of Varna, governed by religion. The western scholar's mindset is prone to analyze a particular society on the basis of a single system of stratification. Therefore, he calls the American society as 'class society', the European one as 'estate society' and the Indian one as 'Caste Society' (Beteille, 1969). Andre Beteille has referred to modern sociologists like Leach and Bailey who believe that the Caste Society as seen in India is distinct from all influences of a class-based one as it is based on the principle of 'non-antagonism' between different castes placed at different rungs of social hierarchy (Ibid). They argue that there may be competition within a particular caste for individual dominance but never between castes. This echoes the Ambedkarite understanding of caste as static class and class as dynamic caste. Such

interpretations have greatly influenced the dominant current of Indian scholarship on caste which happens to be Marxist in nature. Therefore, when analysing the inequalities existing within the social system of Bengal, the Marxist scholarship has focused on the dynamics of class division between the landless sharecroppers and the wealthy landowners or on the socio-economic changes brought about by the influx of refugees from East Pakistan. There was a tendency to presume that after the post-independence Congress paternalism and subsequent three-decade long rule by a leftist coalition, Bengalis have successfully dropped their caste baggage and caste was no longer a significant social fault line in Bengal. The supporters of this view could lend credence to their claim by pointing out that Dalit movement never took a serious form in independent Bengal. Partha Chatterjee has pointed out that this has led the ruling Bengali upper caste to claim a kind of exceptionalism which insulates Bengal from the currents of caste-based politics in the rest of India (Chatterjee 2001). The *'Bhadrolok'*, i.e., the educated and respectable Bengali, ostensibly the most egalitarian of the locally dominant classes in India, finds it deeply uncomfortable to discuss caste, as such a discourse can challenge its political and intellectual hegemony premised upon its claim of inclusiveness and acquiescence of the lower castes (Bandopadhyay, 2011). The *Bhadrolok*, comprised almost entirely of the three upper castes of Brahmin, *Vaidya* and *Kayastha*, some 'clean' Sudra castes (the *Kayasthas* themselves were considered to belong to a clean Sudra caste in the not-too-distant past) and even some educated Muslims, was greatly successful in containing the voices of dissent from non-dominant caste groups during the long decades of Left Front Rule in West Bengal. But their claims to such exceptionalism and caste harmony can be countered if one takes into account the virulently anti-elite militant peasant movements which swept large parts of north and western Bengal in the decades of sixties and seventies. A majority of the participants in these struggles belonged to lower castes such as *Bagdi*, *Bauri* etc. Ranabir Samaddar (Samaddar, 2013) has observed that despite participation of many lower caste peasants in such movements, the *Namashudra* caste, known for their political awareness and pre-independence struggle for political recognition and representation, was noticeably absent. He reasoned that such absence was due to the partition-induced displacement suffered by the *Namashudras* who were primarily concentrated on four districts of East Bengal such as *Barisal* and *Bakarganj*. Such was not the case for most other major lower castes who were based in districts which fell under West Bengal. 2001 Census data shows that *Namashudras* comprised 17.4% of

the Scheduled Caste's population in West Bengal, whereas the other large Scheduled Caste groups like *Rajbanshi* and *Bagdi made up 18.4% and* 14.9% respectively while *Pod* made up *12%* (Ibid). Because the *Namashudra* was identified as the 'immigrant' whose needs and demands were very different from the other Scheduled Castes, they could not make demands to the political system in a united manner. Samaddar has further showed that the Scheduled Castes of Bengal have different economic interests as they practice different professions. Also, low rate of literacy among some of the castes like *Bauri* led to a disconnect between the immediate goals and ambitions of these castes, thereby leading to a situation where a unified Dalit movement in Bengal did not materialize (ibid).

The fiction of caste harmony in Bengal become more apparent upon a study of the political movement which arose to nullify the decision to divide Bengal taken in 1905 by the then Viceroy, Lord Curzon. This decision spurred a fierce outpouring of Bengali nationalism across both sides of the newly created border. The movement it engendered has been lauded in nationalist historiography as the first instance of spontaneous resistance by common Bengalis against imperial politics. However, as the likes of Sekhar Bandopadhyay and Dwaipayan Sen have ably demonstrated, the movement didn't enjoy the full support of lower caste Bengalis, especially that of the Matuas, the vast majority of whose members belong to the *'Namashudra'* caste (Sen 2018). They were considered lowly and 'unclean' and previously called by names such as *'Chandala'* and *'Dom'*, according to Risley (Risley, 1891). The hagiographies of the great Matua leader Guruchand Thakur, son of the sect's founder Harichand Thakur, clearly show that he was opposed to the participation of lower castes in a movement which he viewed as an attempt by the wealthy upper castes to continue their domination in Bengal (Halder, 2009). In one such passage, he is shown to express anger at his fellow caste members who were adopting *'Swadeshi'* measures and chastised them by saying that the *'Babus'* of Kolkata were coming to the doors of the *Namashudra*, which they have never done before, because their own interest was involved. As soon as their purpose was served, the *Namashudra* would be left to rot in the same misery that he had always faced (Ibid). There is evidence that Guruchand Thakur was successful in influencing his followers to stay away from the movement. Dwaipayan Sen mentioned that in parts of Barishal and Bakargunj, where the Matuas were present in large numbers; they refused to accept the dictates of the Congress and attempted to buy cheap Manchester

clothes, instead of the costlier Khadi, resulting in clashes between Congress volunteers and the Matuas. It is interesting to note that much before this agitation took place, Risley was reporting in his famous 'The Tribes and Castes of Bengal', news of a section of the Namashudra caste not accepting rice or water from the upper castes and wearing shoes in defiance of them (Risley 1891). The Matuas, under the leadership of Guruchand Thakur, became the first low caste group in Bengal to secure government positions (the first government employee being his own son), hostels for low caste students in Kolkata and an English medium school in his village run by Australian missionaries and supported by the British government. Moreover, he successfully convinced the British administration to change the caste name of the Matuas from the highly derogatory *'Chandala'* to *'Namashudra'* in the 1911 census, the name by which they are still known today. Such unprecedented success in the face of staunch opposition and derision from the upper castes led Guruchand Thakur to two conclusions. Firstly, that the British government was far more likely to fulfill the aspirations of the lower castes than the caste Hindu leadership of the Congress and secondly, that the only way for the Namashudra and other lower castes to break free of the shackles of the oppressions imposed by the caste system is through western education which would enable them to find jobs under the British administration. Matuas already had a number of wealthy businessmen among their ranks as a result of both Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur's emphasis on business and commerce using the water routes of East Bengal (Mohanta 2002). Now, with this newfound resolve and financial backing of these wealthy merchants, Matuas established thousands of small local schools all across east Bengal wherever their people lived. Guruchand Thakur emphasized the need to educate both Matua boys and girls, even if their families were facing economic hardship. He was quite revolutionary in his thinking for his time and his social situation. Matuas today argue that he should have received the same importance in the history of Bengali renaissance as more celebrated figures like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who is notable for his great zeal for spreading school education in Bengal. They state that Vidyasagar, considered a great humanist, nevertheless found it unnecessary to make school and college education accessible for lower caste children; as he feared that would upset the powerful upper castes to such an extent where they would sabotage his project for introducing modern education altogether (ibid). School education, coupled with a strong community

bonding, helped Matuas and generally, members of the Namashudra caste, to become the most politically aware of the non-elite castes of Bengal.

The two decades before independence is generally considered to be the most active period of nation-wide caste-based agitations and movements in the pre-Mandal era, and the Scheduled Castes of Bengal took an active part in this movement. Guruchand Thakur declared in a historic 1923 conference at Khulna that Matuas need to be united and function as an organized political pressure group if they are to be counted seriously by the Indian ruling class. Their political significance was acknowledged by leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, who kept regular correspondence with Guruchand Thakur and Subhash Chandra Bose, who felicitated him in Kolkata. The 1932 Poona Pact between Gandhi and Ambedkar following Ramsay MacDonald's Communal Award ensured thirty seats in the Bengal Provincial Legislature for the Depressed Classes and this marked the beginning of electoral politics of the *Namashudras*. After Guruchand Thakur's death in 1937, and his grandson Pramatha Ranjan Thakur remaining a Congress loyalist, Ambedkarite Jogendra Nath Mandal rose as the tallest leader of the *Namashudras* who founded the Bengal Provincial Scheduled Caste's Federation along with the formation of the All India Scheduled Caste Federation by B.R. Ambedkar in 1942 (Sen 2018). Jogendra Nath Mandal advocated Dalit unity against the Congress which he perceived as a Caste Hindu party and proposed an understanding between the Dalits and Muslims of Bengal. Under his leadership, the first Dalit minister Mukunda Behari Mallick was installed in the cabinet of the first Fazlul Haq ministry after 1937 general elections (Biswas 2016). But Mandal and his supporters started facing problems after the dissolution of the Haq ministry. The Muslim league ministry of Khwaja Nazimuddin was not overtly sympathetic to the cause of Dalit representation. Their political fortunes started eroding further after a vigorous campaign by Congress to project it as the party for all Indians including Dalits and the efforts of the Hindu Mahasabha for Hindu unity against Muslims. The 1946 elections took place against the backdrop of a looming threat of partition and creation of Pakistan which made lower caste Hindus apprehensive about the Federation's political line of friendship with the Muslim League and this resulted in poor showing in the 1946 elections for the Federation where Congress managed to win twenty-four of the thirty seats reserved for Scheduled Castes (Sen 2018). Dwaipayan Sen has illustrated in his book on Jogendranath Mandal that the poor result was

also contributed to by electoral fraud, rigging and intimidation by the Congress to ensure that their chosen candidates win in the reserved seats and did not represent the integration of Bengal's Scheduled Castes in the 'mainstream' of Indian politics as Partha Chatterjee and Sekhar Bandopadhyay both have suggested (ibid). Sen also mentions how the Poona Pact was responsible for disenfranchising almost ninety percent of the Dalits in Bengal because of the property and education related requirements for determining eligibility to vote. Under a joint electorate system, such exclusions led to the caste Hindus enjoying the power to choose Scheduled Caste candidates palatable to them and this explains the extraordinarily good result of Congress (Ibid).

Considering the above, one may be curious to know what explains the contemporary political resurgence of caste politics in Bengal, spearheaded by the Matuas who are being courted by all major political parties. In order to find an answer, it is important to understand how the political aspirations of the lower castes living in mostly rural settings were effectively channelized and controlled during the Left Front era. This was achieved through a curious dual process of centralization and devolution of political power. On one hand, crucial decision-making powers were firmly concentrated in the hands of the party elite while district and local level functionaries enjoyed considerable autonomy and power within a clearly designated sphere (Chatterjee 2012). On the other hand, complete politicization of the local self-government units was encouraged, where the common party supporter was able to fulfill his aspirations for political inclusion and received a taste of power. The Bengal peasantry, usually a mere spectator in the grand events of Indian politics, tasted power for the first time, albeit in a 'controlled' miniature. Besides vitiating the societal atmosphere of the Bengal village to an unprecedented degree, this led to the slow rise of a non-elite ruling class at the village level. This class, comprising working professionals, medium land owners and small businessmen gave a fillip to 'clean' Shudra castes of Bengal, who enjoy numerical majority among the Bengali Hindus. The political rise of the clean Shudras, comprising of both the landowning farmer castes of *Mahishya, Satchasi* and *Sadgopa* as well as the commercial castes such as *Subarnabanik* or *Kansabanik*, is directly responsible for the political re-awakening of the Matua community. While their resurgence was already being felt during the end phase of the Left Front's rule, the demise of that rule as well as that of the centralized command structure pervading every

sphere of Bengali life, has given further impetus to the politicization of the Matuas. The leaders of the community have long shed any notions of inferiority vis a vis caste Hindus and proudly showcase their cultural and ritualistic differences rather than attempting to integrate with the Hindu society or attempting to be 'Sanskritized' in any way. In their pursuit of temporal power, the religious aspect of the Matua identity has become secondary for the leaders. The Thakur family, the descendants of Harichnad Thakur and keeper of the shrines at Thakurnagar, have broken up into two competing factions, both supporting different political parties. Matuas traditionally do not accept *'Guruvada'* and there is no concept of formal religious training under a Guru or teacher (Mohanta 2002). As such, open participation of the Matua 'first family' into party politics has further diluted the religious aspect of the group's identity. It can be said with conviction now that the Matuas have been successful in transcending their 'subaltern' identity and have become part of the political mainstream of Bengal, changing the very nature of Bengali politics in its wake.

Difference between the Matuas and the Bauls are many and some are very fundamental. To begin with, Matuas do not believe in Guruvada or the need of a Guru for spiritual enlightenment. It was the clear order of the founder of the sect, Harichand Thakur, to not to submit to any Gurus and focus on personal worship and honest work instead. Although his son Guruchand Thakur enjoyed the position of undisputed religious as well as social leadership among the Matuas, the same is not true of his descendants in both Bangladesh and India. The contemporary members of his family enjoy a place of preeminence among the sect not because of their religious prowess but because of their political leadership. In fact, the teachings of Guru Chand Thakur focused much more on the material rather than the spiritual. His emphasis on the material well-being of the Matuas further diluted the need for a Guru. Today, the Matuas have many teachers and healers, many of them travelling through the villages. They also have local leaders of their religious organization but none of them are considered as spiritual teachers. Secondly, there is no concept of secret ritual practices or sexually deviant acts in the Matua faith among the common believer. Instead, almost Victorian standards of fidelity and monogamy are advised and expected (Author fieldnotes 2018). There is no concept of celibate ascetics or mendicants in Matua faith and all great teachers and heroes of the Matua faith were men with family, land and a robust

social life. This can be seen as a sign of defiance to the Hindu norms where celibacy, vegetarianism and mendicancy are all prized as signs of reaching a higher spiritual plane. Risley's 'The Tribes and Castes of India' is the first concerted attempt by a Britisher to develop a methodological framework to analyse the Indian society and to acknowledge the crucial importance of caste in building the fabric of that society. Risley's work came on the heels of the first census conducted by the British rulers in 1881 (Risley 1892). In essence, that was the first attempt by a foreign people to classify and analyse a society as complex as found in India. Therefore, it is understandable that Risley explained caste from a racial angle and viewed the contentions between the Shudras and the upper castes as a racial struggle between the Aryans and Non-Aryans continuing for millennia. To him, the customs of Hindus were 'barbarous or semi—barbarous' and he sincerely hoped that with the introduction of modern western education and legal systems; Indians would eventually leave these customs and become more civilized (ibid). He appreciated the importance of understanding India's caste-based society for the British rulers as caste governs every aspect of an Indian's life and as such is of crucial importance even in matters of politics as well as law and order. Risley viewed all low castes as 'aborigine castes' and provides an account of these castes attempting to climb the rungs of social and ritualistic hierarchy as they emulate the practices and rituals of a locally dominant caste. In this sense, Risley predates M.N. Srinivas in analyzing the process of 'Sanskritisation. (ibid). He mentions that the easiest method followed by these lower castes as well as some of the tribes of central and western India is that they employ a Brahmin priest and this priest then invents a noble ancestry for them. Most of the times, they invent a Rajput ancestry and throw in a miracle in the past associated with some god or goddess and a mythical forefather. According to Risley, claiming Rajput ancestry is the easiest as Rajputs are a very heterogenous lot and being warlike and agreeable to non-vegetarian food, it is much easier for lower castes or tribal groups to claim their status (ibid). He notes however, that a caste acting in this manner is not absorbed into the Rajput caste instantly. Usually, in the first one or two generations, this caste attains the status of pseudo-Rajputs and real Rajputs do not acknowledge them as fellow caste members. However, the new caste severs all kinds of conjugal or commensal relations with other lower castes and now mingles with other pseudo-Rajput castes who have started on this path earlier and had already attained a higher status than them. The easiest method for establishing such relations is to get the daughter married into the higher

caste. This immediately elevates one's caste position. When such gradual elevations take place every generation, within four or five generations, the aspiring caste gets to behave and act like real Rajput at least in their locality (ibid). However, he observed that the case was a little different in case of Bengal. Although some of the lower castes here showed similar trajectories in trying to become more 'respectable', attested by the rise of widow burnings among even the lower castes in 19th century Bengal, but here the main tool for the lower castes to attain a higher social status was education, not ritual elevation (ibid). This observation of Risley is highly relevant in understanding the singular emphasis put on education by the founders of Matua Sect, Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur. However, it is also important to observe that the method described by Risley may not always work for a lower caste, unless it has already attained a certain level of economic independence such as ownership of land or political prominence. In Bengal, it can be observed that most lower castes had Brahmin priests of their own but that did not help their ascribed status in society. In fact, by their association, these Brahmins themselves were considered to be 'Patit' or Fallen Brahmins in the eyes of the orthodoxy. These fallen Brahmins created sub-castes of their own and marriages took place within such categories only. In 'Harililamrita', the posthumously published hagiography of Harichand Thakur, considered to be the holiest book of the Matuas, he has been mentioned as belonging to a Maithili Brahmin family whose predecessors settled in a village of the Namashudras (Barui 2017). However, this claim is hotly disputed by many Matua scholars who view this as a deliberate addition and affirmation of Brahminical influence on the Thakur family. That debate aside, more pertinent to the present issue, is the fact that it is recorded in 'Harililamrita' that when one of the predecessors of Harichand Thakur had to leave the village for certain reasons, the local people brought another family of Brahmins to perform as the local priests. It must be noted that for orthodox upper caste Hindus, the very sight of the 'Chandals', as Namashudras were called, was considered polluting (Bairagya, 2020). Therefore, the newly emigrating Brahmin family must also have been from one of the 'fallen' categories. We will further observe that when the Matuas under the leadership of Guruchand Thakur finally began to attain a level of wealth and political clout, they ditched the practice of having Brahmin priests altogether.

Matua as a Vaishnava Sect and Matua Dehatatwa: An Unexplored Phenomenon

Sekhar Bandopadhyay in a 1995 address in 'All India Dalit Sahitya o Sanskriti' defined Dalit movement as a "Newly developing struggle evolved from the emerging objective reality of Pan-Indian situation which is deeply rooted in the age-old tyranny of untouchability, inhuman oppression and socio-economic exploitation of the down trodden people' (Bandopadhyay in Mohanta 2002).

Nandadulal Mohanta claims that the Matua movement is both a natural continuation of the movement initiated by Phule and Ambedkar while, at the same time, predating these reformer's attempts. If organised political agitation and attempting to transgress the boundaries imposed by the upper castes are the hallmarks of a dalit movement then Guruchand Thakur may be called the first Dalit leader of India. The famous 1881 conference of the Namashudras was organised under his command (ibid).

Why Matua may be considered as a Vaishnava Sect

There is ample evidence of a Vashnava lineage in the two oldest and most respected religious texts of the Matuas. The first one is Sri Sri Hari Lilamrita, the first hagiography of Harichand Thakur written by Tarak Chandra Sarkar and the second is the first hagiography of Guruchand Thakur called Sri Sri Guruchand Charit written by Mahananda Halder. In these texts, Harichand Thakur is clearly mentioned as an Avatara or incarnation of Krishna or Vishnu. It has also been mentioned that he appeared to fulfill a prophecy of Sri Chaitanya who said that he would again take birth among the lowest of the low (Barui 2011).

Nandadulal Mohanta, in the initial pages of his book Matua Andolan O Dalit Jagaran, has attempted to locate the Matua religious views as a part of the greater tradition of Hindu philosophy. He explained that Hindu religious thought is not necessarily tied to the Puranic or Smarta traditions. The greater Indian philosophical tradition, which incorporates materialistic schools of thought such as Charbaka and atheistic schools such as Ajibika and Buddhism are all part of the broader 'Hindu' tradition. Here Mohanta visits the concept

'Hindu' similar to how Savarkar approached it, as an overarching cultural identity. (Mohanta 2002) Some of the atheist traditions were non-Vaidic in nature. Despite this, they received prominence in the discourse of Indian philosophy. Mohanta refers to Vivekananda's argument that despite their fundamental differences, all Indian philosophies strive towards 'fulfillment' of man's life by being close to the perfect being. For this reason, these philosophical schools not only emphasize on 'Moksha' or salvation but also on worldly duties or 'Kama' (everything to do with desires) and on Karma or duties. (ibid). The belief that man can improve his position through good work and a righteous life is prevalent in all such discourses. This is where according to Mohanta, the 'Matua Way' becomes a part of the greater Hindu tradition. According to him, the core canonical literature of the Matuas and the life of its founders provide ample evidence of the Matua way becoming a part of the greater Vaishnava tradition within Hinduism (ibid). In fact, similar to the cosmology of other lower caste sects who have inverted the Hindu cosmic order by establishing their founder or guru as the best of the Avataras or even as the complete and greatest incarnation of the Godhead, Hari Lilamrita also portrays Harichand Thakur as the only 'complete incarnation' of the Lord. In the very beginning of Hari Lilamrita, the following has been written-

"Nityananda Hari, Krishna Hari, Goura Hari |
Harichand Asol Hari Purnananda Hari" || (Sarkar 1916).

This stanza shows a clear attempt from the renowned Matua poet to establish Harichand Thakur as a successor of the earlier Vaishnava avataras. While at the same time proclaiming Harichand Thakur as the greatest of all these avataras. It is interesting to note that this text was not published during Harichand Thakur's lifetime but under the command of his son and successor Guruchand Thakur. It is evident in numerous sections of Hari Lilamrita that Harichand Thakur was against entertaining the Vaishnavas and proudly presented himself as a non-Vedic person who did not abide by the rules of sacred and profane as instituted by Vaishnavism (Sarkar 1916). Guruchand Thakur however, despite his initial opposition, eventually agreed to celebrate Durga Puja in Orakandi and expressly ordered his principal followers such as Gopal Sadhu to initiate disciples on their own, thereby practically breaking the twelve commandments of Harichand Thakur where he forbade the tradition of

Gurubada (Halder 2009). Therefore, it appears that this attempt of proving a Vaishnava connection started from the very founders of the Matua sects themselves.

In the early Matua texts, many attempts have been made to establish a special connection and continuity with Sri Chaitanya because Chaitanite mainstream Vaishnavism was popular among the Namashudra community and their villages were frequented by Vaishnava mendicants. A stanza from Hari Lilamrita establishes this connection thus:

“Purbete Karar Chilo Bhaktagan Sane |
Sesh Lila Koribo Ami Aishanya Kone || “ (Sarkar 1916).

(as per the previous assurance of Sri Chaitanya at the end of his life, his final leela or incarnation would take place in the northeast corner from neelachal, that is, the region of Harichand Thakur’s birthplace, Orakandi).

These texts not only mention the connection between Chaitanya and Harichand Thaur but also between later Vaishnava goswamis such as Narottam Das,

“sei leela samboron, khetor janmadharon,
Nityananda hoilo Narottam||
je jonno e avatar, poschate kori prochar,
Orakandi koila ses leela||” (Sarkar 1916).

There is ample evidence in Hari Leelamrita and other contemporary texts that his father Jasomanta Thakur and his ancestors were also devout Vaishnavas. In fact, the family received the Thakur surname because of their close association with the Vaishnavas and the devotion of Jasomanta Thakur. There exists a tremendous debate among educated Matuas regarding the caste identity of Harichand Thakur and whether the common belief regarding them being Maithili Brahmins in origin is true (Bairagya 2020).

From these debates and discussions, it seems certain that during Harichand Thakur’s time Vaishnaism was still the most prevalent form of worship among the Namashudras despite

all its limitations and caste hierarchy. Therefore, it became necessary for the early Matua leaders to establish a connection between Vaishnavism and the Matua way.

Deha Sadhana among the Matuas

It is a fact that deha sadhana is the single most important aspect of Sahajiya Vaishnavism and its various offshoots such as the Hindu Bauls. To the casual observer the sect or the religion of the Matuas does not appear to be an esoteric one. In fact, it appears quite the opposite. The core tenets of their religion, as described by the founder Harichand Thakur himself is expressed through twelve commandments or 'dwadash agya' (Mohanta 2002). The second commandment of these twelve orders all Matuas to treat all women except one's wife as one's mother. The sixth commandment is to always stay loyal to one woman and also to not establish sexual union solely for the purpose of one's desire.

Similar sentiments were expressed in the 'sixteen prayers of the Matuas' as compiled by the author of Sri Sri Guruchand Charit, Mahananda Halder. The fourth and the eleventh prayer beseech the Lord to help a Matua man to give him the moral strength never to engage with any woman but his wife (Bairagya 2020).

These religious dictates and prayers were given a more formal treatment in the set of rules known as 'Matua Laws' published in 1981 and 1982 from the leaders of the Thakur family based in Orakandi in Bangladesh. Not only do these laws reiterate the earlier maxims of monogamy but further forbids Brahmachari or celibate Matua men to spend too much time with women or to stay for a long time with house holders. It also forbids Matua gurus to accept any service from women that may cause undue intimacy or close physical proximity (Mohanta 2008).

Therefore, one may conclude that the Matua religion is free from the Sahajiya Vaishnava tradition of deha sadhana which in its most pedantic form involves using sexual union with women as a means to achieve a higher spiritual state. However, a detailed study of the writings of the same Matua authors, gurus, poets and even some members of the Thakur family itself reveals a very different 'inner world' of Matua religious practices. This is a

world resonating with the same Sahajiya practices, beliefs and terminology that is very familiar to other Sahajiya sects like Baul. Before commencing a short survey of the Sahajiya stream of Matua literature, one must keep in mind a few pointers. Firstly, it is highly unlikely that the common Matua followers follow such practices in their daily life. The Matua way teaches the value of discipline, hard work and the importance of commercial activities for strengthening one's family and community. Therefore, the common Matua is not bothered with esoteric pursuits. The inner world of the Matuas is well hidden from the outsiders as well as lay followers and it is only revealed to the most trusted and intimate disciples. For an outsider, the only way to gain some insight into this world is through some of the more obscure songs and writings of certain Matua gurus. The question may arise whether Harichand or Guruchand Thakur ever performed such Sadhana or even condoned such activities but it is true that elements of Deha Sadhana exist in the first Matua text Hari Leelamrita itself, published during the lifetime of Guruchand Thakur. When describing the reasons for the arrival of a messiah like Harichand Thakur on earth, Hari Leelamrita says that one of the principal problems of the Vaishnavas which necessitated the birth of the messiah was the inability of the Vaishnavas to adhere to the core Sahajiya teaching of retaining ones 'vajra', 'mulbastu' or 'bindu'. All conversant with the terminology of the Sahajiya understand that 'bindu' is just another name for semen while the word 'prakriti' is used variously to denote either a woman or the female genitals. A line from Hari Leelamrita describing the state of Vaishnavas before Harichand Thakur reads thus:

"Prakritir sthane bindu plabito hoilo" (Sarkar 1916).

For Sahajiyas, 'bindu' is the ultimate source of all creation and the most treasured property of man which is not to be wasted in the pursuits of petty desires.

Another important text in the Matua Sahajiya tradition is 'gurutatva premsagar', a later text by Binodananda ji. This book mentions in clear terms the Sahajiya ways of sadhana such as 'shatchakra', 'rasatatwa' etc. It also suggests that quintessential Sahajiya doctrine that sadhana must be done emulating the qualities of both Radha and Krishna. It mentions the importance of 'parakiya ros' or engaging sexually with women out of wedlock as a better way of sadhana (Mohanta 2002). Binodanandaji, the author clearly stated the support he

received from Angshupati Thakur, the leader of the Matuas in Orakandi after Guruchand Thakur. The book was also available from the Thakurnagar Branch of the Matuas in West Bengal (ibid).

The Sahajiya tradition of the Matuas can further be seen in a book called 'Shatchakra O Sadhan Tatwa' written by the leader of the branch of Thakur family presently settled in Bangladesh, Sripatichand Thakur. He has presented a distinctly Tantrik view of the human body and ways of sadhana. The tradition of Sahajiya worship has in fact, continued throughout the history of the Matua religious movement. Famous and respected Matua poets like Bicharan Pagol, who is the author of the popular 'Hari-Guruchand Charitra Sudha' – mentions in veiled terms the concept of Deha Sadhana. This theme was pursued in detail in his other book 'Sri Sri Guruchand Mahatya' (ibid).

Sahajiya texts are in fact, ubiquitous among Matua religious literature. These texts also suggest a division between lay followers (called Kapi) and experienced practitioner with potential (called Gopi) which is maintained by Matua gurus (Mohanta 2002). Only the later me be privy to secret deha sadhana practices. These evidences undoubtedly serve to strengthen the argument that folk religions and heterodox sects in Bengal take up 'Dehasadhana' or worshiping the body and locating the spiritual universe and the path to spiritual development within the body itself. This is their heritage from the Sahajiya Vaishnavas, who themselves took this path as a means of protest against the decidedly institutional, Smarta and Brahminical turn of Gaudiya Vaishnavism after the demise of Chaitanya and Nityananda. It has already been discussed how even the more liberal minded followers of Niyananda, including his wife and son, eventually reconciled with the Vrindavan authorities and opened the floodgates for reintroduction of casteism and Brahminical dominance in Vaishnavism. The Sahajiya way, a continuation of the materialistic and temporal philosophical streams of India, was the only means available for the lowest strata of the society who once saw hope in the Chaityanite Bhakti movement. All religious movements and formation of sects are a reaction to the prevalent socio-political situation. Chaitanya's movement was timely not just because it stemmed the migration of low caste Hindus to Islam or presented an alternative to the Smarta and Tantric practices of the time, but also because it engendered a sense of radical dissent and protest

against the oppressors. This spirit was absent in Bengal since the demise of the rebel Kaibarta state during the Pala empire. Biographies of Chaitanya clearly show that neither he nor his contemporary followers were the 'trinadapi sunichana' (lower than grass) defeatist and fatalist Vaishnavas of the later era. His show of strength against the local ruler of Nabadweep, the frequent mention of reprisals against the plotting Smarta Brahmins present a picture of a true revolutionary leader albeit a thoroughly Indian one, even limited by that identity. This study attempts to highlight an existing but hitherto unexplored connection between the two worlds of Baul and Matua by tracing their common Sahajiya Vaishnava roots and the similar socio-political challenges which created the conditions for their emergence. It tries to identify both these sects as expressions of radical dissent of the lowest and most oppressed stratum of a society defined by caste divisions. In conclusion, this study examines the contemporary state of both these sects and to determine whether and to what degree they have retained their dissent and how they negotiate the contemporary power structures of religion and politics.

Navigating the Politics of Partition: Matuas as Refugees and Decline of Caste

The history of the Matua's relative political dormancy after being key to the mounting of one of India's biggest lower caste movements during the colonial era is directly linked with their sudden refugee status and loss of home and hearth in East Bengal. This uprooting of the Matuas, mostly belonging to the Namashudra caste, made them the biggest group of refugees in West Bengal. However, their experience as refugees differed significantly than the upper caste refugees who migrated before them. Many of the upper caste refugees had connections on the western side. They had families and friends who helped them to find an initial shelter and many of them were able to swap their land and other properties with Muslims who were leaving for East Pakistan. The Namashudras had no such luxury of acquaintances across the border. Being a group mostly connected to their ancestral land, very few of them have ever stepped outside their own village area. Therefore, the Namashudras had to endure prolonged stays in the government camps in unbearable hardship and had to survive on the dole of the government. They were not allowed to go outside of the camps and find work. They were also treated with in a hostile manner by the locals who feared that these new residents would eventually take away their livelihoods.

The camp dwellers were not even allowed to buy foodstuff or other goods from local markets even if they had the money for it. Many movements took place in these camps where the residents deliberately flouted these draconian rules and went to the local market for trade. In such conditions, it was inevitable that the refugee camp dwellers wanted to unite and agitate to fight for their rights with the state. Opposition parties and groups were keen to make use of their discontent and challenge the Congress party which was in power both at the center and the state.

The Communist Party of India (CPI) saw a golden opportunity to increase its support base and find cadres for militant operations and agitations in the fuming refugee camps of Bengal. It remains a fact that refugees from East Bengal were given a fraction of the government assistance that was accorded to the refugees coming from West Pakistan. Nitish Biswas, a prominent Dalit activist and academic has shown in his book 'Banglay Udbastu' (Biswas 2022) that East Bengal refugees were not given any benefit of several central schemes such as legal help in arranging for land or property swapping across the border, continuations of various scholarships before the partition, land for resettlement etc. whereas large sums were spent for West Pakistan refugees.

Dwaipayan Sen's book 'Decline of Caste Question…' clearly shows that the Bengal government as well as he union government was never sincere about rehabilitation of the Namashudra refugees in West Bengal and in 1958,a pan-India Chief Minister's meeting held in Calcutta decided that all refugees camps were to be closed within a year from that meeting and that all refugees living in these camps were to be settled outside Bengal in various new camps where they would be given land for agriculture (Sen 2018). Subsequent government programs such as the Dandakaranya Project painted a rosy picture of the resettlement camps in places like Malkangiri in Orissa, Gadchiroli in Maharashtra and Raipur in contemporary state of Chhattisgarh. Refugees were also settled in far-away places like Andaman Islands and places like Udham Singh Nagar near Nainital (Biswas 2022). Incredibly insensitive language was used in some of the government's promotional efforts for these new settlements. For example, one camp located in the inhospitable Chotanagpur region of Bihar was lauded for its 'Salubrious Climate' which the refugees would enjoy despite there being no tillable land and no source of drinkable water.

Such insensitive treatment meted out to the refugees of East Bengal, a large majority of whom belonged to the lower caste Namashudra group must had a reason beyond the stated ones such as the inability of the state government to accommodate the new entrants or to find new lands for them. The forced displacement of the Namashudras to different remote parts of the country may have been part of a larger political design to safeguard against any future united Dalit political mobilization which could challenge the caste Hindu dominated state and ruling political party. Another factor that might have contributed to the decision of the government to break the spatial accumulation of the Namashudras was their role during the freedom struggle and a section of their leadership's alliance with the Muslim League in opposition to Congress. The Namashudra Matuas under the leadership of Guruchand Thakur boycotted the Bengal unification movement in 1905 because he realised that a divided Bengal under British rule might be more conductive to socio-economic development of the Matua Namashudras (Biswas 2016). The trend of the Namashudras staying away from the nationalistic movements led by the Congress on account of the caste Hindu Congress leadership was the principal driving factor behind the rejection of Namashudra leaders like Jogendranath Mandal to support Congress led movements (Sen 2018). Even Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, who stood steadfastly by Congress during partition and played an active role in convincing the Namashudra refugees to accept the resettlement plan eventually grew aloof from Congress in 1964 when the Congress government in Bengal virtually abandoned the cause of the uprooted Namashudra refugees who flew to West Bengal after large scale violence was unleashed on them in East Pakistan after the Hazrat Bal incident (Biswas 2016). These factors, along with the popularity of the left-inclined Nikhil Banga Bastuhara Mahaammelan (NBBM) and the CPI dominated United Council for Refugee Colonies (UCRC) in the camps must have influenced the Congress government's decision to break the refugee unity by sending them to different remote locations of the country (Sen 2018).

However, this government sponsored dispersal was not the only determining factor in the decline of caste based political demands in Bengal after independence. The radically altered status of the refugees also played a crucial part. It has been argued by scholars like Sekhar Bandyopadhyay that after partition, the very definition of who was a Dalit in Bengal was

transformed (Sekhar 2004). The refugees, irrespective of their caste identity, constituted the 'New Dalit'. There is scarce evidence that caste identity played a part in the camp resident's life or their ability to win favours with the camp officials. In fact, there is evidence of camp residents rejecting Jogendranath Mandal's attempts to secure the support of the Namashudras in camps like Bagjola and Dhubulia where he was charged with breaking the united struggle of the refugees and sent back (Sen 2018). The UCRC, in particular, was vehemently against exploiting any caste angle in the refugee's struggle as it harmed their own political vision of harnessing the refugee's disappointment with the Indian state for their own political advantage.

Jogendranath Mandal's resignation in 1950 and his eventual comeback to Kolkata as a defeated man whose political credibility has all but eroded completely and his subsequent attempts and failures at securing elected office in the heavily Namashudra refugee dominated areas of Nadia and North Twenty-Four Parganas have been construed as the ultimate rejection of caste-based politics among the Namashudra refugees (ibid). However, the truth may not be so simple. The fact is that despite the continuous attempts of the press and the Congress party to paint him as the culprit for the miseries of the refugees and one of the chief architects of the partition, he was still popular among the Namashudras. Dwaipayan Sen has mentioned how the UCRC attempted in interest the cam-dwellers in attending their programs by listing Mandal as an invited speaker without even informing him about the event. It was because of his lasting popularity that the Republican Party (RPI), which was a breakaway faction of Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation invited him to be their face for Bengal and eventually drew Mandal out of his self-imposed political exile in 1957 (ibid). In fact, it appears that Mandal's defeat in the two consecutive Loksabha elections from reserved constituencies of Hanskhali and Bagdah had much to do with fact that under the joint electorate system, Congress fielded their own scheduled caste candidates in these seats. Mandal was further handicapped by the fact that the CPI and UCRC, despite their initial verbal assurances that they would support Mandal's candidature in lieu of his support for CP candidates in other reserved constituencies, did not keep their promise and fielded their own candidates from his constituencies. The Janus-facedness of the communist leadership was further exposed in a 1967 by-election, which was to be the last election fought by Mandal. In this election, the CPI (M), then already in power as part

of the first United Front government in Bengal, promised Mandal their support during election and promised to enlist his fledgling Republican Party as a member of the People's United Left Front alliance. However, Mandal observed with wonder that his party was not only not listed as a member of the alliance but CPI(M) had fielded their own candidate against him (ibid). It is important to remember that in this election, mandal managed to secure the support of the disenchanted P.R. Thakur and also of other influential Scheduled Caste leaders who had recused themselves from active politics since independence. His defeat, despite these factors marked a final chapter in the political activism of Dalits in Wes Bengal and heralded the victory of the communists in wooing Dalit support in their favor.

Pre-independence

Dalit political assertion in Bengal was at its peak in the years prior to independence. It is interesting to note that the Khwaja Nazimuddin ministry was the only instance when the two marginalized sections of Bengal's citizenry, namely, the Dalits and the Muslims wielded political power in the state. Jogendranath Mandal's historic win in the first 1937 elections from a general seat defeating the nephew of the top Congress leader of the area was a signal that Dalit politicians could secure the support of the Caste Hindus if their political interests align with the Dalits (Biswas 2016). What is less discussed however, is the role of Dalit organizations and leaders in the demand for Pakistan and the observation of Direct Action Day. Direct Action Day is remembered in Indian historiography as a watershed event that firmly convinced the Hindus and Muslims of India about the truth of the two-nation thesis and the inevitability of partition. Although the blame usually lands squarely on Jinnah and the Muslim League for turning what was to be a day of peaceful strike and protest into one of the ghastliest bloodbaths and fratricidal violence this country has witnessed, still there were many nuances to this event of singular importance in Modern India's history. It is necessary to understand the events and the political maneuverings leading up to the violence which will give an idea as to why the 'United Bengal' proposal of Sarat Chandra Bose, Fazlul Haque and Mandal was unsuccessful to find takers either within the political establishment or among the masses (Sen 2018). The identification of Mandal as anti-Hindu and ultimately anti-India and his subsequent failure to secure a place for himself as the leader of the numerous Scheduled Caste refugees of West Bengal is

directly linked with these events. In short, the very reasons for the decline of Namashudra political clout and activism is linked with the decisions made by the Scheduled Castes Federation and Manda during the tumultuous period of 1946.

The Cabinet mission was the final attempt by the colonial administration of resolving the demand for two separate states from the territory of British India. In order to resolve the problem, the Mission presented the convoluted solution of creating three separate group of states comprising the western, eastern and north and southern part of the country. The groups will be governed by their own respective governments while the central government in this confederacy will be responsible for only defence, foreign affairs and communication. The scheme was aimed to please Jinnah who stood to fulfil his territorial demand for Pakistan without actually dividing the country. Jinnah was, therefore, in support of the plan. Congress and Nehru in particular, demanded that states should have the right to decide whether or not they want to remain in a certain group. Congress also demanded that the constituent assembly would not be bound by the provisions of the plan. This was not acceptable to Jinnah as a Hindu-majority constituent assembly could easily overturn the provisions of the plan. Ambedkar and Mandal both were vehemently against the plan as it left no room for the representation of the Dalits in the new administrative settlement. Mandal, during this period was still advocating for a united India with a reversal of the Poona Pact and an end of the joint electorate system. His firm belief was that an undivided Bengal within an undivided India was the best outcome for his followers, the Namashudras. When it became evident that Cabinet mission was a failure and Jinnah became inflexible regarding his demand for a separate state of Pakistan after a failed meeting in London that Mandal and the Scheduled Caste Federation decided to threw in his lot with him and the League because of their deep mistrust of the Congress leadership (Biswas 2000).

Direct Action Day, i.e., 16th August of 1946 coincided with a pan-India program of demonstrations and meetings against the joint electorate system named ‘Anti-Poona Pact Day’. On that fateful day, Federation leaders including Mandal organized marches and meetings with the active participation of Muslim League. This was their first great miscalculation about the turn of events. It is important to note here that some months prior to this event, he 1946 provincial elections had taken place and the Muslim League managed

a stellar performance by winning 113 out of 118 Muslim dominated seats in Bengal (Sen 2018). The Scheduled Caste Federation, only managed to win two seats out of the thirty in which they contested and Congress' Scheduled Caste candidates won twenty-four seats. B.R. Ambedkar himself lost his seat in this election and thus Mandal became the senior most Dalit leader in India for a time. His stature grew further because of his successful campaign to elect B.R. Ambedkar from one of the reserved constituencies of East Bengal where he managed to secure the support of independent as well as Congress MLAs for Dr. Ambedkar. In fact, another feather in his cap was added after the election when four of the Scheduled Caste Congress MLAs elected in 1946 declared to leave Congress to support Mandal's movement and cited the poor treatment meted to the Scheduled Castes in the Constituent assembly by only assigning them one representative. They were also disgusted with the fact that Babu Jagjivan Ram was chosen to represent the Scheduled Castes in the interim government formed in 1946 although he was considered a Congress stooge and not a true representative of the Scheduled Caste's interest (ibid). His new position and the fact that Muslim League needed outside support to form the government in Bengal led him to assume senior ministerial positions in the Suhrawardy government. Perhaps, this experience of sharing power with Muslim League influenced his decision to defy the wishes of Ambedkar when he chose to stay in Pakistan and became the first Law minister there. Whatever may be the case, the fact is, Mandal was closely associated with the Muslim League when Direct Action Day broke out in all its hideousness.

Mandal's own biography, as pointed out by Sen, completely avoids the topic of Calcutta Riots (ibid). Sen, although sympathetic to Mandal to a point where it might question his neutrality as an observer altogether, couldn't but comment on this very significant omission which may be construed as an admission of guilt for collaborating with the League. In fact, Mandal's response to the riots in the face of an avalanche of criticism and derision from all sections of the Hindu society is quite astounding in its toneless quality. When Congress' Dalit MLA Bijay Krishna Sarkar as well as Birat Chandra Mandal, the President of Depressed Classes Association both pointed out the fact that not only Dalits were the target of violence but even the life and property of prominent Ambedkarite leaders were not spared by Muslim mobs during the riots, implying a breakdown of the Dalit-Muslim axis forged by the Federation, mandal replied in the Jagaran newspaper (ibid). His reply was full of

criticism of the premier Bengali newspapers which apparently didn't allow him to publish his responses on account of their nexus with the upper castes. Regarding the riots, his simple and reductionist assessment was that it was a not a struggle between Hindus and Muslims as was being portrayed but a struggle between the Congress and Muslim League where the Dalits were being used as pawns. He advised the Dalits to remember their marginalization during the Cabinet Mission, the interim government and the constituent assembly and to remain steadfast to the political line being advocated by the federation, i.e., the path of Dalit-Muslim solidarity by aligning with the Muslim League. Such a response at such a turbulent time not only alienated him from the caste Hindus who were in opposition o him anyway but also from a large section of the Scheduled Castes. Mandal was rewarded for his allegiance as the Muslim League's choice for Law minister in the interim government. Nehru, Azad and Gandhi were all critical of his inclusion and Gandhi said in clear terms that Mandal's acceptance of the position was particularly unfortunate in light of the atrocities perpetrated by the Muslim League in East Bengal, an issue which was still smouldering. It can be argued that the unfortunate political stance of Mandal during and immediately after this period marked the beginning of his political career's long eclipse while marking the starting point of the decline of caste in Bengal's politics.

Mandal in Pakistan and the subsequent exit

The 1946 election was an extremely important event in the path to partition. The excellent performance by Congress in the seats reserved for Scheduled castes and the humiliating result of the Federation seemed to prove that the lower caste voters put their faith in Congress as well as in a state ruled by their fellow religionists rather than a state ruled by Muslims. On the other hand, the domination of Muslim League throughout India in the Muslim majority electorates firmly established them as the representative of the Indian Muslims. Thus, the two-nation theory seemed to have been vindicated, further exacerbated by ploys of the League such as the making the interim government come to a grinding halt because of the partisan functioning of the interim finance minister Liaquat Ali Khan, a Jinnah confidant. The election of Mandal by the League as the Scheduled Caste's representative over Ambedkar also seem to prove a design whereby the League was already preparing to use him as a tool in their envisioned Muslim state (Biswas 2016). Thus, when,

despite the opposition and misgivings of the Scheduled Caste Federation and Mandal to partition, when partition became inevitable, Mandal chose to join the Pakistani side. His decision was no doubt influenced by the very real problem of millions of Namashudras residing in East Bengal, who would now become a minority in the new state but he was also moved by the promises given by the leaders of Muslim League and especially Jinnah, who repeated hi promise of a Pakistan where all minorities and especially Dalits would finally get their rights. Ambedkar had his reservations about Mandal's decision and wrote to him that even if he was supportive of Mandal joining the Pakistan government for the time being but he should advise the Namashudras of East Bengal to be prepared for an eventual exodus to Bengal and buy land properties in West Bengal in advance. In spite of this warning, Mandal joined the Pakistan government as their first Law Minister and even became, at an astonishingly short notice from Jinnah, the first president of Pakistan's constituent assembly (Sen 2018).

Whatever hopes Mandal might have had of the Dalits getting a fair and equitable treatment from the Pakistan government, they soon proved to be baseless (mandal 1950). The first warning signs of the disregard of the Dalit interests from the Pakistan government were seen in the repeated refusals of Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan to appoint a Dalit minister in the East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, despite there being a very large number of Dalit Namashudra voters there. In October 1947 itself, just two months since the birth of the Pakistan state, the then President of Upper Tippera Scheduled Caste Federation was informing Mandal about the atrocities happening on Dalits in the region (Sen 2018). Mandal, despite acknowledging privately to confidants that all was not well in Pakistan, was steadfastly towing the official line of promises of secularism and better opportunities for Dalits and indeed, all minorities in Pakistan. He was actively dissuading the minorities, including his Dalit supporters who were trying to cross the border to India. It was his repeated tours of the Dalit areas of East and West Pakistan that was in large part, responsible for containing the flow of Dalit refugees to India. The chief minister of East Pakistan Khwaja Nizamuddin in fact, wrote to Jinnah requesting the presence of Mandal and a few speeches from him in areas like Bakhargunj and Barishal so that the communal tension could be lessened as early as 1948. That proves that the minorities were feeling unsafe and facing persecution in Pakistan from the very beginning. All the while Mandal and

Scheduled Caste Federation were not only keeping up a brave face in front of the public and the press (Mandal gave one interview to international press in 1947 stating his full confidence in the idea of Pakistan and claimed that no instances of minority-baiting has not taken place, therefore the minorities of Pakistan have no reason to migrate, knowing full well of the atrocities that were happening) but they were also exhorting the minorities and especially their Dalit followers to be 'unflinchingly loyal' to the Pakistan state while pillorying the Congress and Hindu Mahasabha for attempting to foment unease and violence among the minorities in Pakistan (ibid).

It is interesting to note that B.R. Ambedkar realized the true nature of the Pakistani state much before Mandal did. In 1947, he commented that the Dalits were no better than they were under colonial rule across the border in both countries. It was he who first declared in clear terms that the Pakistani state ultimately have an Islamizing agenda which would not let the minorities in that country live in peace and considered India to be a better alternative (Ambedkar 1946). Jogendranath's later reminiscences as described in his unpublished biography cited by Dwaipayan Sen illustrates that Mandal was not oblivious to the obvious instances of religious aggression that was affecting his people and the minorities in general, however he was quite helpless in articulating his true feelings at that stage (Sen 2018). After the illness and eventual demise of Jinnah, Pakistan took a harder approach regarding the minorities. Urdu was poised to be the national language and it was to be the mandatory medium of instruction in all schools. As law minister, Mandal had to oversee all such bills, including an alarming bill which attempted to stifle all anti-Pakistan speech and expressions, including reporting of the atrocities taking place in East Bengal. He became even more distraught when a bill was introduced to consider anyone thought to be leaving to the country as 'Intending Evacuees' (Sen 2018). The bill was aimed exclusively at the minorities, whose property could then be confiscated by the state. Even if one of the owners of a joint property left the country, the whole property could be attached by the state. Mandal was infuriated at these continuous attempts to weaken the legal standing and rights of the Namashudra and other minorities and this last bill resulted in major altercations between him and other ministers. By this time, from 1949, reports of atrocities such as large-scale rape, murder, arson and looting of Namashudra villages in the districts of Khulna, Jessore etc. started coming to light. Mandal was feeling particularly uneasy in his

role as the spokesperson of not only the Scheduled Castes but of all minorities in Pakistan, including the caste Hindus, a group for which he had deep seated animosity. However, he was still hopeful of getting his caste-based special demands of appointing a Dalit Minister in East Bengal, continuation of scholarships for Dalit students and reservation for Dalits in jobs fulfilled by the Pakistan government (ibid).

The events of February 1950 were perhaps the final catalyst that forced Mandal to reconsider his position within the Pakistan government. From February of that year, large scale and unprovoked violence took place against Hindus in the districts of Chittagong, Noakhali, Sylhet and Rajsahi. The violence was especially intense in Sylhet as the Karimgunj district in Sylhet became a part of India as a result of the Sylhet referendum (Franda 1970). The enraged local Muslim leaders started mongering vicious rumors of the persecution of Muslims in India and especially Kolkata. The Muslims were called to take revenge for these perceived atrocities on the Hindus of Pakistan. A rumor of Fazlul Huq's murder by Hindus further added fuel to the fire. In Sylhet alone, it is estimated that more than 600 villages were completely deserted as the Hindus were either killed or they flew to shelters (Sen 2018). The atrocities went on unabated well into March of 1950, fully supported by the Police, local administration and the paramilitary Ansar force of Muslim League. Moreover, when Hindu MLAs of East Pakistan refused to be silent about the genocidal pogroms, they were arrested, publicly humiliated and indicted on false charges. Arrested MLAs included Namashudra MLAs like Suresh Chandra Biswas. Even members of a government appointed fact finding team were arrested when they gave an adverse report regarding the atrocities (ibid). It is astounding to observe that Jogendranath, despite his indignation at the treatment of the Namashudras and his occasional speeches in the Namashudra areas where he castigated the Muslim League, he was still holding on to his post of minister. According to his autobiography, he was apparently being 'instructed' by some top leaders of the Congress in India as well as the minority representatives of Pakistan to stay in his position as that seemed the only way for him to do something about their condition. His dream of Dalit-Muslim unity in Pakistan collapsing, Mandal still towed the official line of asking the minorities to remain in Pakistan although he could provide no guarantees that they would be safe and free from further persecution. The Nehru Liaquat Pact of April 1950 did little to improve the situation of Dalits in Pakistan. The Pakistani

government was becoming exasperated with Mandal's attempts to appear as the leader of the minorities in East Bengal and in order to break his hold over the Namashudra voters, the Khan government decided to appoint a Namashudra minister to the Bengal cabinet named Dwarka Nath Barori who had a long history of enmity with Mandal (ibid). By appointing Dwarka Nath, the Pakistan government signalled that Mandal was not indispensable for them anymore. Thereafter, in September 1950, under the pretext of visiting his son who was studying in Kolkata, Mandal made a quiet and ignominious exit from Pakistan, urging the minorities to trust the Pakistan government to the last. He wrote his famous resignation letter from Kolkata, describing in detail the atrocities visited upon by the Hindus and the culpability of the Pakistan government in perpetuating those atrocities. The question of why he didn't resign in Pakistan and attempted to safeguard the rights of his beloved Scheduled Caste minorities there instead of leaving them to a dark and uncertain future was not addressed in his letter.

Pramatha Ranjan Thakur After Independence

Whereas the political trajectory of Jogendranath Mandal is helpful in elucidating the condition of Namashudras, their condition in West Bengal after partition merits scrutiny as well in order to find answers to the original question of the decline of Namashudra political clout and caste based political mobilization in Bengal. Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, or P.R. Thakur was the grandson of Guruchand Thakur and he was the heir to the position of Matua religious leader after the demise of his grandfather in 1937. P.R. Thakur was the very antithesis of Jogendranath in terms of his political and social views. A barrister trained at Lincoln's Inn in England, he had an essentially different outlook to the Matua and Namashudras problems than Mandal, who had to fight a bitter struggle at every stage of his academic and professional life to be established (Thakur 1995). Thakur understood the political and social inequalities faced by the Matuas in particular and the Scheduled Castes of Bengal in general and acknowledged the importance of such positive discriminations such as reservation in government jobs, scholarships and hostel facilities for Dalit students. However, he was, above all, a nationalist leader who seemed to believe in the Congress principle of 'Independence first, social problems next'. The Thakur family, especially Guruchand Thakur, was instrumental in creating the first Matua organization at Orakandi

in 1915, named Sri Sri Harichand Mission (ibid). P.R. Thakur also formed another organization named 'Matua Mahasangha' in 1932 which was more politically inclined with a view to organize the Matuas independently from the influence of major political parties as well as the Scheduled Caste organizations. Thakur was an important foil for the militancy of Mandal and Federation and his position as the Matua guru, no doubt, helped his cause. After partition, he was in mortal danger from the rioters who personally attacked his home and he lost little time in leaving his home in Orakandi and came to live in West Bengal in 1947 where he first stayed in Bagula as a refugee and thereafter managed to buy large quantities of marshy lands at Gaighata block of Bongaon subdivision of the North Twenty-four Parganas district (Sen 2018). He established a company named Thakur Land Industries limited. By 1950, more than fifty thousand Matuas were settled in Thakurnagar and the place was transformed from a sleepy hamlet into a bustling community with a post office, a rural hospital and even a railway station. Thakur, originally inclined to conduct his politics as an independent candidate, contested the 1952 elections as an independent candidate from two seats of Gaighata and Hanskhali (ibid). Jogendranath and another important Namashudra leader of East Bengal named Agni Kumar Mandal also contested this election as independent candidates. The decision to run as independent candidates shows that the Namashudra leadership of erstwhile East Bengal were apprehensive about trusting Congress or other political parties at this stage. However, Thakur, Mandal and all such independent SC leaders were defeated in this election and Thakur realized that without building a solid political base among the Namashudras, who were now living in radically altered conditions as refugees in Bengal, their political awareness and power couldn't be revived. Before the 1957 elections, Thakur warmed up to Congress and contested the 1957 and 162 elections successfully as a Congress candidate. His other associates like Mahananda Halder, the author of 'Guruchand Charit' was also elected twice on a Congress ticket. Another of his followers, Manindra Nath Biswas, managed to defeat Jogendranath Mandal twice from Bongaon and Bagdah assembly constituencies on a Congress ticket (ibid). Using his political connections within Congress, Thakur managed to attract the attention of senior Congress leaders and ministers, including the refugee rehabilitation minister R. Ahmed to the condition of refugees at Thakurnagar and received critical governmental assistance which helped him to make this first experiment of establishing a 'private' refugee camp in India a successful one. During his elections, where he fought

against the Scheduled Caste Federation and later, the Republican Party, along with the communist party, Thakur used his position as the undisputed Matua guru to secure wins. He attempted to make Jogendranath see the merit of joining Congress. During a meeting in Thakurnagar, he requested Mandal to join Congress as that was the only path for the Namashudra landless and pauperized refugees who 'cannot run behind me or you for political meetings on empty stomachs'. Mandal, of course, refused the pragmatic Thakur and continued with his tirade against Congress and its refugee polies (Biswas 2016). He was less successful in influencing the refugees living in government camps. At that time, a three-way struggle was ensuing between the communist-led UCRC, the Ambedkarites and the Congress to win political dividend from the refugee camps and the refugees seemed to make a distinction between Thakur the Matua guru and Thakur the Congress politician. Although Thakur was able to frustrate the efforts of Jogendranath Mandal led Republican party in the elections (Thakur's chosen candidate managed to defeat Mandal twice with a margin of almost ten thousand votes), he was not happy with the laxity of the Bidhan Chandra Roy led West Bengal government which was not honouring the constitutional provision of securing at least 12% of government jobs for the Scheduled Cast and Tribes after 12 years of the promulgation of the constitution (Sen 2018). Even in the Central government jobs, where a similar policy of reservation was underway, the Scheduled Caste candidates were facing hardship from the caste Hindu officials who were attempting to block their progress. He also took active part in mobilizing the refugees for their right to food and harshly criticized his own cabinet colleague Prafulla Sen who was then the minister for food supplies in the Bidhan Roy ministry (ibid). Despite these misgivings and complaints, Thakur was pleased with the fact that the first provisional government of independent Bengal under Prafulla Sen included three Scheduled Caste ministers despite pressure from a section of Congress's central leadership to do otherwise. Dr. Bidhan Roy's cabinet also included three SC MLAs along with seven SC parliamentary Secretaries. Thakur himself found a place in the 1962 Roy cabinet as an independent minister of state for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe's Development. His faith in Congress (He once remarked, 'It is my Congress, with all its fault, I love it') (Sen 2018) was instrumental in convincing a large number of Scheduled Caste camp-dwelling refugees, many of whom were Matuas, to leave their camps for the settlements prepared under Dandakaranya Project. He was advocating for refugees to embrace the rehabilitation plan as early as December

1956, as observed in his speech at Cooper's Camp. Thakur's disillusionment with Congress began after the sudden demise of his friend and benefactor Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy in July 1962. The next Chief Minister, Prafulla Sen, was not on good terms with Thakur due to his earlier criticism of Sen during his stint as Food Supply minister in the Roy cabinet. Sen, utilizing the political maneuverings that emerged during the Kamraj Plan era, cleverly ousted Thakur from the ministry (Biswas 2016). The communal riots related to the Hazrat Bal incident of December 1963 further forced Thakur's hand regarding his relationship with Congress. On the allegation that a few of Prophet Muhammad's relics, kept in a shrine at Kashmir were stolen, Hindus were attacked by enraged Muslim mobs throughout the subcontinent. The worst sufferers were also the most helpless minority, the Matua Namashudras of East Bengal. Religious persecution at Jessore, Khulna and Bagerhat of East Pakistan reached such a fearsome level that almost twelve lacs Hindus from Pakistan were forced to migrate to West Bengal as refugees in 1964. The violence on Hindus on the other side of the border caused repercussions in areas of West Bengal such as Bongaon, Habra and Barasat where Namashudras were residing in large numbers (ibid). West Bengal government cracked down on the rioters and the police specifically targeted the Namashudras who were termed as 'restive and violence-prone'. Not only the West Bengal government was not sympathetic to the cause of the refugees but the it didn't even register cases to prosecute the accused police personnel who were accused of raping and murdering several Namashudra girls during this period as an act of retribution for the alleged violent behavior of the Namashudras. Considering the hostile attitude of the government, P. R. Thakur finally decided to sever his relationship with Congress on 6th December, 1964 (Sen 2018).

After his resignation, P.R. Thakur joined forces with other scheduled caste MLAs of West Bengal Vidhan Sabha in order to criticize the government for its inaction and police violence regarding the 1964 refugee crisis. It is interesting to note that MLAs across all party lines supported his initiative, including the CPI MLAs. In the same year the veteran Congree leader Ajoy Muykherjee left Congress and established his own party called Bangla Congress. Mukherjee, who was an old associate of Thakur invited him to join the new party. Thakur realized that due to the anti-refugee and anti-scheduled caste stance of the Prafulla Sen government, Congress was staeadily loosong the support of the Namashudras in Nadia

and North 24 {Parganas. Therefore, he contested in the 1967 Lok Sabha elections as a Bangla Congress candidate and defeated his Congress competitor by a wide margin. Congress lost even more electoral support among the scheduled castes in the interim election of 1969 where out of the 54 scheduled caste seats it won in only 11, whereas, the newly formed CPIM managed to win 15 seats. However, the newly formed Progressive United Left Front government, consisting of such diverse parties as the Bangla Congress, Forward Bloc, CPI, CPI(M) and a host of other smaller parties, didn't manage to stay in power for long (Bandyopadhyay 2005). There are two reasons for its demise, one being the exceptional popularity of Indira Gandhi and the resultant surge in electoral performance of the Congress. The second reason being what Partha Chatterjee has succinctly identified as the class character of that party, being principally a political vehicle of the rich zamindar and large farmers of Southeastern Bengal (Chatterjee 2013). The advent of Communist parties in West Bengal and the food movement put this section under pressure resulting in the decimation of Bangla Congress.

P.R. Thakur's electoral performance in the next two Lok Sabha elections speaks volumes of the radically changing character of Bengal's politics and the eclipse of caste-based politics in Bengal which that particular environment engendered. Seeing that Bangla Congress was not an option, Thakur again joined the Congress and contested in 1971 and 1977 from Nabadweep constituency where he had won previously with huge margins. However, in the two afore-mentioned elections, he was defeated by a relative new comer from CPIM. After his 77 defeat, he announced retirement from active politics (Sen 2018). With Jogendranath Mondal dead almost a decade ago, Thakur's decision ultimately heralded a definitive suppression of Namashudra political power in particular and scheduled caste politics in general. Without a doubt, the spatial dispersion of the refugees, the largest section of them being Namashudra Matuas, played a crucial role in limiting the viability of caste based mobilizations in Bengal. However, considering the substantial number of Matua voters in the constituencies of Nadia and 24 parganas districts, the dispersion of Namashudras alone cannot explain the political performance of tall leaders like Mondal or Thakur. The popularity of CPI(M) in the wake of Siddhartha Shankar Ray's brutal rule and the experience of emergency sublimated distinct political expressions of Namashudra identity. The acute poverty of the Matua refugees who had no skills except

agriculture and fishing made them particularly receptive of CPI(M)'s promised programmes of land distribution and controlling of the price of food stuffs and other necessary goods. The repeated promises made by leftist leaders like Jyoti Basu that refugees then residing in resettlement camps outside Bengal would be brought back and given a livelihood also influenced the Namashudra and Matua community's decision to back CPIM and other left parties instead of politicians of their own caste.

The belief of the scheduled castes on CPIM received a rude shock when on 30th January of 1979, after a prolonged government initiated economic barricade, the West Bengal police open fired on the mostly Namashudra refugees of Marichjhapi (Mallick 1999). At least b36 refugees lost their lives during the firing (ibid). Marichjhapi was a water-shed event in the history of caste politics in Bengal because it proved without a doubt that all the communist and socialistic dogma of the Left parties couldn't alter their leaderships typical upper caste view of the refugee problem and their complete insensitiveness to their toils. The event of Marichjhapi was followed by wholesale arrests, forced deportations, arson and looting by the police. Local RSP leader Prafulla Dhali observed that the brutality of the CPIM's police during those days could shame those on duty at Jallianwala Bagh. Still from 1977 to 2001 the CPIM had no problem in mobilising scheduled castes votes for its candidates. The 36 Dafa programme of the Left Front whereby colonies were legalized, due taxes on farmland were forfeited., land rights were given to the landless among many other pro-poor programmes ultimately prove d to be too important for the erstwhile refugees to mount a successful challenge to the left rule. The absence of a strong opposition party also forced their decision to support the left. The acute hunger of the Namashudra refuges for fertile land was well exploited by the CPIM) who redistributed more than two lac acres of land among the Scheduled Caste refugees by 1984, comprising almost 30% of the total land redistributed (Sen 2018). Land redistribution, along with the political inclusion of the Scheduled Caste at Panchayat level after the introduction of the local self-government managed to draw support towards the left. In 1982 and 1991 elections, the Left Front managed to win a staggering 52 and 57 seats out of the 59 reserved seats for the Scheduled Castes (Biswas 2016). However, these numbers may provide only a partial account of the Namashudra political thinking in this period. Manosanta Biswas has shown in his book 'Banglar Matua Andolan…' that the margin of the Left Front's victories in the Namashudra

areas such as Bagda and Hanskhali were often slim, despite their famed 'machinery' for winning elections (ibid). This proves that a large section of the Namashudras never considered the Left as an alternative and remained loyal to the Congress. In fact, the caste character of the Left leadership in Bengal was never hidden from the Scheduled Caste leaders. They never found a place of importance either within the party structure or the government under the left. In 1969, 24 out of 33 members of the CPI(M) state committee were people of higher castes (ibid). In CPI, 8 out of 9 state committee members were higher caste Hindus. Even, land reform and redistribution were not unqualified successes for the CPI(M) as far as the Scheduled Caste communities were concerned. Biswas has shown that in 1991, the percentage of landless farmers among the Scheduled Castes stood at 41.12% whereas for the general castes, the number was 15.55% (ibid). Also, the number of Scheduled Caste persons who managed to shift to a secondary or tertiary sector was also very low. Therefore, it can't be said the Left rule was greatly beneficial for the Scheduled Castes in West Bengal.

Role of Matua Mahasangha after the establishment of Left Front rule

P.R. Thakur decided to strengthen the Matua Mahasangha as a non-political social and religious reformation-oriented group of the Matua Namashudras after he decided to leave active politics in 1977. He completely the reformed the organization 1986 when the new organizational charter of the Mahasangha declared that the organization was a platform for all Dalits and not for the Matuas and Namashudras alone (Samaddar 2013). The document was instrumental in building the Mahasangha as a successful pressure group for Dalits in West Bengal and also facilitated channels of communication and fostered unity among the different Scheduled Caste groups in Bengal. Along with a focus on reviving the pride of the Namashudras in their religious practices and their beliefs, the organization also fought for their demands such as free education and identification documents for those refugees who arrived after 1971. The continued presence of the Matua Mahasangha as the biggest socio-religious organization for the Scheduled Castes in the Nadia-24 parganas area, where Matua vote controls at least 25 Vidhan Sabha seats is the reason why the Matua Mahasangha was successful at a later period in changing their identity from that of an apolitical pressure group to a political organization. The unity of the Matuas under the Mahasangha was a

valuable asset as that established their identity as a dependable vote bank for the political parties, especially the CPI(M) (Biswas 2016). The 'Vote Bank' identification, coupled with the non-political stance of P.R. Thakur did restrict Namashudra political aspiration at this stage but their internal cohesion and acute political awareness helped them to become the most powerful representation of lower caste politics in West Bengal at a later period.

Chapter Four

Transformation of Baul and Matua Identity in Contemporary Bengal: Immersion and Consolidation of Identity

This chapter attempts to present an assessment of the present situation of Bauls and Matuas in the two districts of Nadia and Murshidabad from two different perspectives. On one hand, the chapter attempts to understand and study certain social and economic indicators which might point to the material wellbeing of these two groups. On the other, an attempt has been made to systematically study and understand the contemporary views in the Baul and Matua society regarding their traditional religious beliefs and practices. Finally, this chapter attempts a comparison between the two groups, highlighting their respective socio-economic conditions, their ability to navigate contemporary power structures and their capacity to retain the core characteristics of their respective beliefs intact. The findings and observations presented in this chapter are the result of fieldwork spanning a period of almost five years between 2017 and 2021. Although, this research is formally concerned with the period between 2000 to 2019, the onset of the covid pandemic and the resultant extensions granted to the period of research enabled the inclusion of some data gathered during 2021.

Although this research work has benefitted immensely from the painstaking on-ground research conducted by brilliant academicians and researchers like Sudhir Chakrabarty, Shaktinath Jha and Hugh Urban but such secondary studies were of limited use in determining the condition of the two groups in question during the more contemporary period under research. The fact is, that most of the seminal research works on Bauls and Fakirs concluded their fieldwork by the early 1980's. Perceptive scholars such as Jha and Chakrabarty did discuss the noticeable changes in Baul identity leading to a proclivity for material prosperity and the decline in the numbers of actual Baul sadhaks (factors often ignored by foreign scholars like Urban). Yet they had no way of predicting just how fast that decline was going to be and just how transformed a Baul society a researcher will encounter during his field work when attempting to cover the same geographical region as these stalwarts. Jeanne Openshaw, who conducted, in this researcher's opinion, the most extensive fieldwork in both the Rarh (areas on the western side of the river Ganges, including Burdwan and Birbhum) and Bagdi (Eastern side of the Ganges, consisting the

districts of Nadia and Murshidabad) region, was gathering data between 1982 and 1991 (Openshaw, 2002). Although Sudhir Chakrabarty supplemented his earlier fieldwork on Bauls during a fresh stint of research between 1996 to 2002, but his focus during the period of this government sponsored research was on the Bauls and Fakirs of the entire state of West Bengal and not only on the districts of Nadia and Murshidabad (Chakrabarty, 2009). The latest on-ground research on the Baul community that could be accessed by this researcher were undertaken by Lisa M Knight and Benjamin Krakauer, both of whom conducted their field works at the latter half of the first decade of the new millennium. Krakauer's field study ended in 2013 (Krakauer, 2005). Both their works, however, focused almost exclusively on Bauls of the better known Rarh region, much like earlier celebrated scholars like Edward C Dimock. Thus, it can be hoped that a fresh study of the two districts of Bagdi region can elicit some new and interesting details regarding the contemporary socio-political and religious situation of the Bauls and Fakirs.

Coming to the question of assessing the present situation of the Matuas, it may be said that not much secondary data is available on the subject in English language. Matuas still figure as a relatively new topic of academic interest and the existing research articles on them is primary based on available data. It should be cleared in the beginning that a large amount of primary research data is available on the songs, literature and other cultural activities of the Matuas such as 'Harijatra', which is a play performed to teach Matuas about their great gurus. Since Matua literature and songs are considered as expressions of Dalit literature as well as post-partition Bengali literature, these aspects of the Matuas are indeed, well studied. Researchers like Dr. Birat Bairagya, Santosh Kumar Baroi and Ashish Hira have produced exhaustive volumes focussing on these aspects (Bairagya, 2020). The political trajectory of the Matuas in West Bengal, firstly as a group of lower caste refugees and subsequently as an important pressure group has also been studied in detail by authors like Prof. Manosanta Biswas and Dr. Nandadulal Mohanta (Biswas, 2016). While these earlier works were extremely beneficial in acquiring an idea of the Matua identity and its history, both of these works took a chronological and historical approach in describing the socio-political location of the Matuas in present Bengali society. Since both these academic works were the first of their kind, they had to delve in lengthy expositions of the basics of the Matua faith, thus lacking the scope of undertaking a contemporary fieldwork. Moreover,

all of these works were authored by scholars who were Matua themselves. Therefore, it is possible that they lacked the dispassionate gaze of the outsider which can be beneficial to research. For example, both Mohanta and Biswas's work only passingly mentions Mahananda Halder, who was the second tallest leader of the Matuas after the undisputed Matua guru Pramatha Ranjan Thakur (P.R. Thakur). Halder was not only instrumental in establishing the Thakurnagar colony which is the very heart of Matua activity today but he was also the author of the sacred book of Matuas, 'Guruchand Charit' and a two-time MLA. He had a falling out with P.R. Thakur and left Thakurnagar to live in faraway Palashipara village in Nadia (Personal Interview by Author 2019). His exclusion from the discourse of the Matua's political activism is surprising and it is these lacunas in presenting a comprehensive picture regarding the Matuas that this chapter attempts to address.

This researcher took a decision early on during the fieldwork that the preferred method for gathering data from the Matuas will be a mixed approach involving one to one interview, group discussions and questionnaire, the latter being served to the subjects either during door to door interactions or during group discussion sessions. The preferred approach for the Bauls and Fakirs however, focussed on the method of informal and mostly unstructured interviews. The reason for this difference lies in the very different attitudes of the Bauls and the Matuas regarding the subject of the research. While for the Bauls, the subject needed to be presented mostly as an enquiry about their attitude towards other major religions and Vaishnavism and Islam in particular, the Matuas needed to be asked more about their status as a formerly untouchable Scheduled Caste group now ascending the ladder of political power. Since the enquiries were so different in nature, the method also needed to be different. Another important factor driving the decision regarding the choice of the techniques had to do with the practical issue of utilizing time and resources of the researcher. The Matuas are firmly tied to their household and their land and therefore, a large concentration of subjects can be found in a single locality, which made the group discussion and questionnaire methods viable and more rewarding. The Bauls and Fakirs, even if they live in certain locations in a more or less organized manner, such as the Gorbhanga village, their population is much lower compared to a Matua village. Also, in contrast with the Muslim Fakirs, Hindu Bauls don't live in organized and close-knit communities in the Bagdi districts of Nadia and Murshidabad. Therefore, it was

counterproductive to use the questionnaire method for them and group discussions were naturally, not feasible. A final factor influencing the decision to use an unstructured interview method, as opposed to a structured interview with a fixed set of questions, had to do with the unwillingness of the Bauls and Fakirs to submit to such an interview. This researcher has experienced that most Bauls and Fakirs like to talk freely on subjects such as religious harmony, humanism and the universal appeal of music to create peace in society (these topics were so commonly and readily discussed by most Bauls and Fakirs, regardless of the actual question asked, that sometimes the researcher felt as if a prepared and well-rehearsed speech was being given instead of an interview) and the only way to glean meaningful information from them was to engage in a freewheeling chat while at the same time, being mindful of opportunities to ask the real questions.

Regarding fieldwork on Bauls, the present research is focussed on the two districts of Nadia and Murshidabad but for the sake of a better understanding of contemporary Baul life and identity, field visits were not completely limited to these two districts. Occasional visits to the Bauls of Rarh region or interaction with them helped in obtaining a fuller picture of the status of Bauls as well as helped in building an awareness of the differences between the Bauls of the two regions in terms of their attitude towards their profession and their ideologies. Lastly, it should be mentioned that some of the famous 'Mela' or fairs where one encounters the largest number of Bauls, take place in areas which borders these districts and sees a large number of Bauls from these districts attending these Melas. The researcher therefore, has used data acquired from such village fairs outside the two districts under scrutiny. The villages in the Bagdi region which were visited during the fieldwork are mostly clustered around the sub-divisional town of Karimpur, situated at the border of Nadia and Murshidabad district. The famous village of Fakirs, Gorbhanga which is situated in the Tehatta subdivision of Nadia district, is located a few kilometres from the town. Other places such as Hariharpara in Berhampore subdivision of Murshidabad and Jalangi in Domkol subdivision of the same district are also close by. Much of the field work was done as day trips based in the Karimpur town. It has often been suggested to this researcher by the Bauls themselves that a night stay at their homes was a better alternative than simply arriving at their houses and interviewing them if one wanted to thoroughly be acquainted with their practices. However, on such occasions, their suggestions were politely denied

because this research was not focussed on the intricacies of their beliefs or their peculiar practices but rather than on their present socio-economic condition and their status as a dissenting sect.

Some of the outcomes regarding Bauls may seem too harsh and too generalised to describe the great number of Bauls and Fakirs living in the Bagdi region. To answer such probable criticisms, the researcher must clarify that it is not possible to visit every village or interact with every Baul living in an area as large as two large districts in the short span of time that a university Ph.D. course allows. There are, without doubt, many such individuals who still follow the ideal path of Baul-Fakiri sadhana and practice the Dam-Dhikr and other ways of ideal Baul forms of meditation. However, the large percentage of Bauls encountered during traditional village fairs, in the villages and during programs aimed at bringing Bauls together such as Lalon Mela etc. did not satisfy the researcher regarding their 'authenticity' as Bauls. Now, authenticity obviously is a highly subjective concept to use here. However, during the course of an almost four year long period of interaction with several Bauls, their associates, neighbours and sometimes, their immediate family, a pattern emerged whereby one could identify whether a person claiming to be a Baul or dressing and behaving like one is truly a follower of the Baul path.

This researcher is painfully aware of the severe limitations that a clearly urban, 'respectable' and upper-caste outsider will be subjected to when conducting research among groups which are either secretive (the Bauls and Fakirs) or distrusting and hostile (a section of the Matuas who were not happy with this researcher's caste identity or doubted the true intention of this research). However, that chasm was often a bridgeable one. When one sits down with the subjects of his research and is able to inspire confidence among them about the harmless nature of the work over repeated visits and encouragements from mutually known persons, slowly a trust builds up. Although it may also be that the subject loses interest in the whole process altogether. They are after all, hard-working men with little time to spare for idle gossip. However, it was observed that most subjects, especially the Bauls and Fakirs interviewed, were actually quite interested to talk once the initial hesitation was overcome.

Fakirs of Gorbhanga

Between Tradition and Modernity: Two Fakirs at the Crossroads

A previous chapter on Bauls have described in some detail the opinion of late Shri Sudhir Chakrabarty regarding some of the more senior and respected Bauls in this list like Mansur Fakir and Golam Fakir. He was acquainted with them when they were young baul trainees under their respective gurus. Chakrabarty commented quite frankly, after writing about his long interaction with Mansur Fakir and his father, the late Azhar Fakir that, 'Azhar Fakir was a knowledgeable true Fakir, Mansur was a capable singer' (Chakrabarty, 2006). Mansur Fakir's grandfather migrated to the Gorbhanga village, near Karimpur, a sub-divisional town of Nadia district near Murshidabad-Nadia border (Personal Interview by Author, 2018). He migrated to Gorbhanga from Gaur in Maldaha when the former was but a forest. Different stories regarding the etymology of the village's name are heard from the various Fakirs and common folk of the village. While Mansur Fakir maintains that due to the migration of their family from Gaur, who basically established the village, the place was called Gorbhanga. Other villagers recount a tale of Afghan soldiers (locally called Gor, possibly a vulgarization of Ghori) who were separated from each other here (bhanga or seperated), hence the name. A possible third reason was revealed to the researcher during a tour of the village when mounds of an ancient structure were seen. Upon enquiry, it was revealed that the old structure was existing before the village was established and it was much larger in the old days before the villagers indiscriminately used the mortar and bricks for their own purposes. May be the old structure was part of some fortification (Garh) which is now in ruins (Bhanga or broken, another meaning of the word), resulting in that name. Mansur Fakir is one of the most renowned names in the folk music scene of India and abroad who had performed, according to his own testimony, in all the states of India as well as in several places abroad such as London and Paris. Mansur Fakir has a substantial following online, with some of his videos, showing the simple joy of a Fakir one with his music, touches the one minion views mark on streaming sites like YouTube. His fame, and that of the other most renowned Fakir in the village, Arman Fakir, has resulted in Gorbhanga becoming somewhat of a weekend tourist destination for the music aficionados of Kolkata and other parts of urban West Bengal. Every year, on 12th of February, he organizes a large Baul-Fakir Mela on his sprawling Ashram premises where he, the fourth of five children,

has built a handsome shrine for his late father. The Mela is attended by hundreds of Bauls-Fakirs from all over the state as well as by a veritable groundswell of casual and seasoned tourist and visitors.

Golam Fakir is a friend, contemporary and frequent collaborator of Mansur fakir. He is called 'Bodo Golam' as there is another, almost equally famous younger Fakir with the same name, who is thus, called 'Choto Golam'. Bodo Golam Fakir is a renowned singer who has performed in in many countries and released numerous albums. He is famous for his song 'Akashta Kapchilo Kyan' (Why was the sky shaking) which can be conceived as a lesson for the orthodox Muslims who consider Baul and Fakir music as Haram or forbidden. Both Golam and Mansur Fakir are frank about their previous experiences of persecution from the Maulvis and other Orthodox Muslims. Mansur Fakir states that much of their land, owned by his father, was forcibly taken away by the local Muslim zealots and the Muslim League sympathisers. Both fakirs are sympathetic towards the Left Front period, despite some serious incidents of anti-Baul violence happening during that era. They point out that senior CPI(M) leaders were there to help the Bauls in such situations. However, both agree that the situation is even better under the present disposition. They are quite happy with the respect provided to Bauls and Fakirs by the present state government. Golam Fakir, supporting a claim advanced in an earlier chapter of this thesis that Bauls are Fakirs are two distinct groups, states the supremacy of Fakirs in connecting with the supreme power (Personal Interview by Author, 2018). He is doubtful about the Baul's (Hindu Baul) ability to reach the level of piety and closeness to God that a true Fakir can attain. He also laments the state of the Fakiri sadhana in the present day by acknowledging that a lot of 'actors' dressed up as Fakirs are ruining the Fakiri religion and cites songs of Lalan Shah who warned against such appropriations of Fakir identity by amateurs.

The Fakir Identifying As a Qawwal

Arman Fakir is one of the two most well-known fakirs of Gorbhanga and like Mansur Fakir, his Ashram is large and well decorated with photos of eminent western musicians adorning the cemented raised and covered platform that he has built in his yard. The platform serves as a meeting place for visitors and fellow Bauls. During Mela or other programs, it acts as

a stage. Arman Fakir is one of the newer generation of fakirs of Nadia and Murshidabad who have adopted to the changing public perception about religious acceptance among the Muslims of Nadia and Murshidabad. While the instances of oppression and violence on Muslim Fakirs is mostly a thing of the past now, still, the Muslims of Nadia and Murshidabad are no doubt, more conventional and purist than they were in the seventies. Fakirs like Armaan Fakir and Choto Golam Fakir, have, therefore, started to imitate the Qawwali tradition of northern and western India. Perhaps the most famous of the Bengali Qawwals, Arman Fakir sports an austere white dress with a pagdi covering his head. Unlike most Fakirs, who often dance ecstatically on stage with their songs, he makes it a point to always sit in the cross-legged fashion of one offering 'Sezda' or prayer during Namaz when performing in an informal setting. Even during a stage performance, he doesn't dance like the Bauls and limit the use of accompanying instruments ektara, dotara, manijra or kartal, harmonium and the Bangla Dhol, a popular percussion instrument for most Bauls and fakirs. The songs are sung simply, with synchronised clapping to keep the beat and a harmonium to carry the melody. Most of his songs glorify the Allah, his prophet or the famous Sufi saints of India and use Arabic terminologies generously to describe their qualities. Arman Fakir states that he was first acquainted with the concept of Bangla Qawwali in 1995 when he travelled to Kusthia in Bangladesh and met his future guru, Gani Pagal (Personal Interview by Author, 2019). Arman Fakir is reconciled with his identity as a Muslim and sees no reason why one can't be a fakir while being true to Islam as well. He can cite verses from the Quran and the Hadis describing the validity of certain forms of Music as a method of pleasing Allah. At the same time, he is well versed with the basic tenets of Vaishnavism and incidents and stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharat which focus on the aspect of 'Bhakti'. Arman fakir does not wish to disclose his methods of 'fakiri sadhana' or the techniques he uses to control his breathing and thus, control his desire but he affirms that he does practise these techniques.

Two different methods of acquiring information were used for the Bauls and the Matuas. There was an obvious reason for this. Unlike the Matuas, it is hard to find Baul villages in the Nadia and Murshidabad anymore. It is far easier to find hamlets and villages with a large concentration of Muslim fakirs but the same is not true in case of the Bauls. For example, in the famous Gorbhanga village, where visitors from all over the state as well as

numerous foreign visitors arrive every year, there are no Bauls presently living there. The Fakirs who live there. Do not identify as Bauls but as Fakirs and Qawwals although they speak the familiar Baul language of Baul being a religion of love and there being no distinction among Hindu and Muslim Bauls. The Hindu Baul feels no need in the present time to be protected by numbers. He is not being persecuted by any religious or social authorities any more, rather he is being celebrated. Therefore, the Hindu Baul lives, like any other professional in places with better markets, communication and other opportunities which will support his increasingly urbanized life. The most successful ones, who are able to draw a regular stream of wealth urban and foreign followers, usually builds their own 'Ashram', which are usually well-appointed homes with provisions for a well decorated space for music and communicating with the followers as well as the casual visitor.

The Bauls of Nadia and Murshidabad

The categories of Performer and the Householder

Based on their profession, or rather, the extent of reliance on a traditional profession, this researcher has divided the contemporary Bauls in the Nadia-Murshidabad region into two broad categories, namely, the 'Performer' and the 'Householder'. These categories have nothing to do with their conjugal status, number of children or ownership of a house (despite the emphasis on not producing children as a crucial part of their Sadhana, most Bauls that have been interviewed or came into contact during the present research were family men. More than one child was also quite common). No Baul worth his name is dependent on mendicancy or 'Madhukari' in the old sense of the term when Bauls and their partners often went door to door in villages and sang for alms. The white or saffron-clad singers who perform near tourist spots or on public conveyances are usually trying to earn a living by imitating Bauls.

The 'Performer' is an individual who has a formal training in singing and playing some sort of instrument from a teacher. That teacher might have been a Baul or anyone with knowledge of folk music. In the previous decades, such training encompassed a thorough understanding of the songs and the underlying philosophy that it meant to convey, including

specific words and phrases which might be familiar with only the disciples of a particular guru. The Performer may or may not be initiated with 'Diksha'. That 'Diksha' however, is not the Baul diksha which is given by a Baul guru after a long process of training and testing the disciple before allowing him to take part in the secret sadhana practices of the Bauls. The Performer is also often an uninitiated individual or initiated in 'Krishna Mantra' by a Vaishnava or Jat Vaishnava guru and the so-called Baul himself also, usually belongs to a Jat Vaishnava category. The Performer may be a consummate folk artist who is not only familiar with modern technology and urban lingo to impress his audience, but he can moderate the tone of his performance according to the character of the audience. The Performer needs to travel far and wide and he is almost always on the road. Some of them have a permanent address, which they invariably call an Ashram. Some live in their own houses and some still live in the household of their teacher. Only the most young and inexperienced ones do the latter. The Performer is multifaceted and his repertoire is wide. According to the mood of the audience and the locale of his performance, he can sing Lalon Sahi songs (by far the most common or go-to songs, Lalon songs used in films are always a favourite), or Vaishnava Kirtana songs with appropriate 'Bhava' or state of mind including crying and howling in spiritual ecstasy when the occasion demands. The Performer can sing a few select 'Rabindra Sangeet' (Tagore songs) and belt out some folk-rock numbers on popular demand. Some of the songs are definitely for adults and sometimes cross all threshold of decency to regale his young male audience members who hang on till late night to enjoy such performances during the numerous Baul melas or other local occasions. The same Baul might sing a pretty transparent 'Dehatatwo' song and follow with a lengthy and pretentious exposition of the same afterword, if he perceives the audience to be particularly educated. The Performer, if he is a beginner, might travel alone with very few accompanying instrument players. The most common instruments used are the electric keyboard (universally called a 'Casio', regardless of the make), octa pad (a must and often, the only percussion instrument), Dhol and Dotara (rustic percussion and stringed instruments, respectively). Another must have instrument, although almost entirely ornamental, is the famous 'Ektara' or one stringed lute. Some Performers also use the 'Khamak' as a stylish percussion instrument. Performers usually wear a highly stylised version of the simple robes of the Baul. Here, it is important to note that the more 'serious' Baul singers usually wear white or simple ochre clothes whereas the pure Performer may

wear any colour of clothes, as long as it looks exotic and serves the purpose of establishing his cherished 'baul-ness' in the eye of the observer. The Performer may also not be a full-time singer and may hold a regular job, may be a retired serviceman or a small shop owner. Singing assignments are mostly seasonal and very few Bauls manage to attract the attention of government officials or influential city-based patrons who may help in providing a liveable earning throughout the year based on performances alone. Even renowned Bauls who do not necessarily fall into the category of 'Performer', often have to bolster their earnings through other means.

The Performers, barring the most casual or the neediest ones, are usually familiar with some basic concepts of the standardised Baul philosophy which is also discussed and dissected by the city based educated Bengalis. That does not mean that they have a first-hand knowledge of the Baul sexo-yogic practices intrinsic to the Baul sadhana or way of worshipping their own body, which they consider to contain the truths of universe. The Performer is also prone to exhibiting some behaviour which is considered as improper or impolite in the bhadrolok society, for whom the performance is taking place. Such behaviour may include openly smoking marijuana, using abusive language as a form of endearment and can even extend to boasts about someone's sexual prowess as a proof of his advancement in Baul sadhana. It is observed during this researcher's field work that such eccentric behaviour is almost exclusively reserved for the 'outsiders' or spectators and the same Baul can be a very sane and calculating person in private.

Performers are regularly engaged to sing in assignments where they are required to perform alongside established non-Baul folk artists and even with westernized folk-rock acts such as the numerous 'Bangla Bands' which cropped up in the Bengali music scene from the mid-nineties. Benjamin Krakauer has written about the somewhat helpless situation of the Baul who gets associated with such acts (Krakauer 2015). Although being associated with an established band or being part of an established folk artist's entourage ensures better and more regular income, but Bauls are treated as expendable cultural acquisitions by such artists and are often replaced. Krakauer mentions an unnamed but popular Bangla Band which replaced even a famous Baul like Basudeb Das due to a bout of ill health that he suffered from (Ibid).

The ‘Householders’ is a term created to categorise a particular type of Baul for the sake of convenience by this researcher. The ‘Householder’ denotes a Baul who is not dependent on singing professionally as the primary source of income. Such Bauls can further be divided into two categories. The first of these may include a Baul who is continuing the linage of well-known Baul masters and therefore, enjoys a host of followers or Sishwa who take care of the material needs of their Guru. Such gurus also enjoy ownership of sizable land, often enjoyed tax free as ‘Debottor’ (land entrusted for upkeep of a temple or other religious activity, perpetually tax free). Such gurus are now few in number as it is difficult for them to attract devotees nowadays through lineage alone.

The second type of ‘Householder’ are the really well-known Bauls. They are the stars of the folk music scene not only in West Bengal but internationally. Enjoying a following reminiscent of a rock star, these Bauls may flaunt their foreign connections and wealth. They are smart and are very well connected to the musical and academic world of Kolkata. These Bauls are very comfortable in appearing for an academic interview as they have done it many times before. Therefore, they are also the hardest to gather meaningful information from. Almost all the Fakirs mentioned previously would fall under the category of Householder Bauls, if not for their insistence on creating a separate Fakir identity for themselves. Only one of the Bauls discussed below fulfil the qualities of being considered as a Householder, the rest fall under the category of Performers. Although many Bauls in this region other than Sasti Das, whose interview will be discussed below, fall under this category (such as Ramen Bairagya, Arjun Khyapa etc.), for the sake of brevity, only his case will be discussed. Since it is the opinion of this researcher that Performer Bauls will present a richer understanding of the general situation of Bauls, their case has taken precedence in terms of space allotted.

Confessions of a famous Baul

Sasti Das Baul is a senior and respected Baul and musician who lives in the Bhimpur village of Krishnanagar-1 Block of Nadia district. He is a contemporary of the famous Purna Das Baul and was a part of the revival of the Baul and folk music scene of West Bengal (Personal Interview by Author, 2020). Sasti Das has sung in all major Indian cities as well as in international venues like Paris, London and Amsterdam. He is now a septuagenarian who lives in a quaint corner of Bhimpur, which is a village in name but a bustling mini-town in reality. As is common with most established Bauls this researcher had the opportunity to meet at their homes, Sasti Das lives in a pucca house built on a large piece of land. He has built a small hut on the yard in front of the house which is used for practicing and performing Baul songs, socializing with other Bauls, city-based friends and admirers. It is also a place for enjoying the chillum of Marijuana that Bauls are so fond of.

Sasti Das is eager to talk about his past successes and is especially keen to point out that he was once, considered an equal of Purnadas Baul, the undisputed 'Baul Samrat' of Bengal. Sasti Das frankly admits that he is not a sadhak Baul, rather, he considers his songs to be his sadhana (Ibid). This is a common refrain that is heard from many other Bauls as well. Upon being requested to elaborate, he goes into a freewheeling discussion about the beauty, simplicity and humanity of Baul songs and how it speaks of the divine residing not in temples or mosques but inside the human body. On being asked if that understanding necessitates anyone calling himself a Baul to practice the Dehasdahana or Body-Worship that Baul sadhana recommends, he again says that performing the songs is also a form of sadhana as that also can bring oneself close to the divine joy. He is a generous host and his small and simple hut is frequented by the locals as well as from people afar who visit every evening to have a chat, listen to some beautiful songs and to smoke in peace. The women of the household quietly arrange for snacks and tea, never speaking to the guests and never staying in the hut for more than the time required to place and clear the cups and serving plates. On a related note, this researcher has observed similar behavior by the women in other Baul households as well, even at those in Rarh area, in Santiniketan. This is in marked contrast to the confident and open manner of engagement that is observed with the Matua women, who actively take part in discussions and often lead their religious or political movements from the front. Despite the existence of some famous female Bauls (called

Baulani) like Parvathi Das Baul or Rina Das Baul, most women Bauls in villages adhere to a far stricter social and moral code than their male counterparts.

Sasti Das is a businessman as well, who has started a small shop adjoining the hut where things of everyday use can be bought. Business is slow during the afternoon, and the white bearded Baul is happy to entertain the researcher and his friends. He says cryptically 'Baul mane je ki eta to keu boltei parche na' – meaning that 'nobody is being able to define what Baul really is' and then leaves it at that. This researcher was then reminded of the copious number of texts which dwell on that particular topic but did not pursue this line any further, for the sake of the conversation. Sasti Das admits he was never initiated in the Baul way by a Baul guru. Rather, he was initiated as a Vaishnava (Krishna Mantre Diksha) and still wears the tulsi beads that an initiated Vaishnava does. In this way, he is not different from the predominantly 'Jat Vaishnava' or lower caste Vaishnava Baul singers of the Rarh or Bagdi. Sasti Das also confesses that along with the secretive bodily rituals of the Bauls, he also does not practice the breathing-based meditation techniques used predominantly by the Fakirs such as 'Dam' and 'Dhikr'. On being asked why he doesn't, he casually answers "oto somoy nei!"- (I don't have time for it!). Sasti Das is not exceptional in the casual eschewing of core Baul practices, most Bauls encountered during this research were not regular users of these techniques as well

The two worlds of Bauls

From Dimock to Chakrabarty, researchers and commenters have spoken at length about the inner world and outer world of the Baul. However, here, the researcher is pointing at a different divide in the Baul-Fakir society, that being the very noticeable difference in the living standards and clientele of different Bauls. Although it was Purna Das Baul who acquainted the Bengalis with the concept of a sophisticated and urban Baul and almost single-handedly lifted the Baul identity from that of a rustic folk singer to a respected artist, the lifestyle of certain Baul and Fakirs seem to have surpassed his (Chakrabarty 2009). Along with the entire village of Gorbhanga, certain Baul Ashrams like Bannabagram Ashram of Sadhan Das Bairagya and the famous Japanese Baulani Maki Kajumi in Burdwan and Guru Chhaya Ashram in Anur, of Hooghly district have become veritable

tourist destinations with Kolkata-based tour operators promising an 'authentic' taste of the rural life with a sprinkling of Baul music for a day trip (ibid). The Guru Chhaya Ashram organizes an annual Baul mela in the month of February when the whole place is decorated and lit up like an upmarket marriage venue. Along with good quality sound systems and video recording facilities of each performance, the whole premise of the sprawling ashram stays under close circuit camera surveillance!

Most famous Bauls and Fakirs of Murshidabad such as Arman Fakir, Mansur Fakir or Sadhan Bairagya have their own Facebook accounts, which are regularly maintained by informing followers of their next program or by posting photos and videos of the informal musical sessions at their own ashrams. Their mobile numbers and other details are also available easily online with organizations such as Banglanatok.com who can act as intermediaries if one is interested to book them for a show or organize an academic event such as a seminar. Parvathi Baul, being one of the most renowned Baul performers of the present day, has taken the concept of 'digital marketing' further by creating a slick website for herself and her ashram where, through easily navigable menus, one can learn about her journey as a Baul, her music and the lineage of her gurus. In the website, Parvathi Baul proudly proclaims that she regularly visits famous foreign universities in Europe and the USA in the capacity of a teacher of music and Baul philosophy. But the most prominent feature on her website is a recurring flyer, requesting the visitor for donations, which is termed 'Madhukari' (the tradition of door to door begging for alms that a Baul is supposed to follow once initiated). Donations are accepted in US Dollar only with a sidenote assuring donors from the USA and France of a tax receipt if the donation amount is more than $300! Not much more needs to be said about the quantum leap that the world of Baul-Fakirs has made since the day when Jyotirindranath Tagore invited a hitherto unknown (to the city elite) Lalon Fakir to his houseboat, with a young Rabindranath Tagore having his first exposure with the world of Baul songs.

Beside all this glitz and glamour, however, exists another world of Bauls. A world where the majority of Bauls live. This is a world of grinding poverty and little or no public recognition. Bauls inhabiting this world have to wait for ill-paying shows which are few and far between; face recurring health problems due to the frequent travelling, over-

stressing of their vocal cords and their habit of consuming large amounts of tobacco and marijuana. A majority of Bauls that the researcher have met were suffering from some sort of bronchial problems, which is also linked with malnourishment. They know and realise that they need to rest their vocal cords but the necessity to earn money for their families leads them to smoke more chillums to forget the discomfort in their throat and to sing for hours. Many Bauls are also addicted to alcohol, to the chagrin of the women in their houses. Their city-based patrons often visit with a gift of alcohol which they plan to consume during a night of revelry and music. The hapless Baul is often forced to oblige and drink with his benefactors, eventually leading to a habit. Due to the easy availability of banned drugs such as heroine in the border areas of Nadia and Murshidabad, some even get addicted to such hard drugs and ruin their lives (Jha 1999). These poor Bauls are further weighed down by the pressure of a family, often including more than two children. Now, in Baul society, it was most respectable to not have children since, before the advent of contraceptives, that was considered as a final test for the yogic power of a guru. But one child was allowed, so that the lineage of a guru could be continued. The Bauls in question however, are clearly not sadhaks, neither are they educated or aware enough of the modern methods of contraception. The resulting large families further lead to their hardships and their fast-deteriorating overall health. This researcher had the opportunity to meet a large number of such Baul singers at the Melas of Sati Ma at Ghoshpara, Kayani, Nadia and Agradwip Mela at Agradwip Gopinath Jeu Temple in Burdwan. Based on the conversations and data gathered from these two melas, a table compiling the various socio-economic facets of these Baul's lives will be provided, after providing a few short excerpts from their interviews.

Bauls at Agradwip

Agradwip, one of the nine 'dwipas' or islands of the greater Nabadwip area is a place of old renown. Situated beside the river Bhagirathi or Ganges, the place is famous for the Gopinath Jeu temple which was established by one of the foremost followers of Sri Chaitanya, Gobinda Ghosh, in 1518. The unique feature of this temple is that here the presiding deity Gopinath, for a period of one month during the month of March and April, perform the last rites of the founder of the temple Gobinda Ghosh. The Baruni tihti (auspicious day) in the Bengali month of Chaitra, which indicates the beginning of this fair is considered to be

most auspicious by the Bauls and the laypeople alike. In an 1823 book, Reverend James Long of the 'Nildarpan' fame reported that more than one lakh people participated in the Mela. (Anandabazar Patrika 16th February 2023). The Mela has grown to huge proportions in the present day and attracts more than a million people. Another special attraction of this Mela is the very large number of Baul singers who arrive here from all parts of West Bengal as well as from Bangladesh. Agradwip Mela is particularly sacred for the Saheb Dhani sect and Bala Hari sects and both sects used to build their 'Gaddi' or large covered tents here. In the present day, however, the activities of these sects have diminished to a great extent. Instead of the Akharas of Bauls who used to stay here for weeks and sing, present day Agradwip mela features numerous akhadas representing many different ashrams of different Vaishnava "math"s (monastic orders) as well as akhadas representing a particular village or area or even a commercial establishment such as a 'Bajaar Samity' or shipowner's guild (Author's field visit, 2018). Although the Mela continues for about a month, most visitors come during the Baruni tithi which is the highlight of the Mela. This researcher visited the Mela during different years and at different times. First of such visits was in 2018, the second in 2019 and the third and last visit was in 2021. During these visits, some general observations could be made.

Firstly, Agradwip mela was still surprisingly rural in character despite the fanfare around it. It was the only mela visited during this research which was not reachable by a vehicle (All vehicles are kept quite a distance away from the mela area and the rest of journey needs to be covered on foot through rough fields and without any lighting during night-time. During the day, one can alight at a place closer to the mela site by boat). It was also the only mela of its kind where generic plastic goods and China-made electronic gadgets and toys were not being sold in large quantities. The mela also lacks the now commonly observed fast food stalls selling Momo, egg role and even burgers to the delighted rural customers.

Secondly, unlike other rural fairs, the visitors were not busy buying goods for household use at bargain prices. Instead, the principal activities included bathing in the river, visiting the Gopinath temple to seek blessings from the deity (not an activity for the fainthearted, as stampede-like situations may occur anytime during the duration of the mela) and simply resting and listening to Baul songs at their own designated akhadas. Each and every akhada

seemed to have arranged their own Baul performances. The putative Bauls, both men and women, dressed in the loudest Baul paraphernalia including the designer and non-functional Ektara, belted out popular Baul songs from the intimidating array of loudspeakers arranged near every stage. In the complete cacophony of hundreds of baul songs blaring out of every akhada, it is quite impossible to figure out a single word of any of the songs, let alone finding some meaning from them. Amidst all the hustle-bustle, a few Bauls agreed to sit down for an interview. The excerpts presented below are the few select ones gathered over the course of three visits.

Interacting with three Bauls at Agradwip

R.H. who will be referred to as such, is a young Baul from Nasratpur of the present East Burdwan district. He sings songs of Bhaba Pagla, Lalon Shah as well as contemporary chart-topping songs. He is associated with a travelling music group or 'sampraday', as is every other Baul interviewed at Agradwip. When this researcher met him in 1st April, 2019, he has just finished an hour-long performance. The smart and easy-going Ramesh was quick to declare that he shouldn't be called a Baul at all. 'Ote Mahajoner asomman hoy, kintu kaj korte hoy bole Baul saji' (I know that these disrespects the old masters of the Baul way, but my professions dictate I dress up like a Baul). He is equally quick to point out that he never claims to be a Baul himself but it is the organizers of his shows who introduce him as one. He adds, a bit defensively that he sees no harm in his singing baul songs if that helps those songs reach to a wider audience (Personal Interview by Author, 2019). This researcher, who just witnessed a very provocative performance from him and a beautiful dancer who performed along with his singing, merely took notes.

Shanti Halder is a female Baul singer from Taranipur village near Tehatta, Nadia. She was one of the first Baul singers whom this researcher had an opportunity to speak with in 18th March, 2018. Her sampradaya includes some children who perform superlatively on stage. Shanti, less dashing and more composed than R.H., is an initiated Vaishnava who initially learnt some songs from her guru. Later, she picked up contemporary songs as traditional songs had few takers in rural venues. She revealed, 'sottikarer baul serokom ar nei. Guru o nei, sishya o nei' (Real Bauls are few today. One can find neither a true Baul guru, nor a sincere disciple). She added that although Baul song and practices are indeed alive in some akhadas across Nadia and Murshidabad; those songs are seldom performed on stage in

rural settings. She also gave an interesting advice, 'sottikarer baul sunte gele Bangladesh jao, okhane ekhono sadhokra achen'(If you wish to meet real Bauls, you better go to Bangladesh) (Personal Interview by Author, 2018). Although this research is limited to the study of two districts of Nadia and Murshidabad, this researcher had the opportunity to meet some Bauls and fakirs from neighbouring Bangladesh at different fairs and they really presented a different and more grounded picture of the Baul-Fakir life.

For the sake of propriety, the next Baul will only be referred to as P.G. He is an older Baul who regularly performs at different venues all over the state. A portly man with a smile, P.G. lives in Katwa, a town in Burdwan district but was originally an inhabitant of Nakashipara area of Nadia district. The interaction with him took place in 12th April of 2021. He was a practising Vaishnava, with the 'Rasakali' or white Chandan markings adorning his forehead, a symbol of a devout Vaishnava. He did claim to be a Baul, despite very obviously being a Vaishnava. When asked about it, he proclaimed, in the glib manner so very common with many Bauls this researcher has interacted with, that in the Baul way, there is no distinction between creed or religion (Personal Interview by Author, 2021). According to his own acknowledgement, P.G's repertoire of Baul songs is limited to a few songs of Lalon Shah, Bhoba Pagla and Shah Abdul Karim of Bangladesh. When asked about his knowledge of other famous Baul sadhak's and their songs such as 'Haure Gosai' or 'Panju Shah', he suddenly became disinterested in the interview and left for something apparently urgent. P.G. is certainly not alone in claiming a Baul identity when they are clearly not. In fact, a large majority of common Bauls encountered during such Melas or performances, were not as forthcoming as Ramesh or Shanti. However, despite their claims of Baul identity and the proclivity to speak in a manner which indicates they are hiding some mystery to the outsider, their ruse is quite transparent.

Bauls Of Ghoshpara Sati Ma Mela

Ghosh Sati Ma Mela is a yearly fair that takes place at Ghoshpara, near to the Kalyani Ghoshpara station and University of Kalyani campus. The fair commemorates 'Sati Ma', the wife of Ram Sharan Pal, who established the famous Kartabhaja sect of Bengal. At one time, Kartabhaja sect had the largest followers among the lower castes of Bengal. The ground near Sati Ma's memorial and a nearby pond is considered to have power of healing through faith, especially for those with skin diseases or physical deformity. The Mela begins

during the Bengali Holi festival or 'Dol Purnima' and lasts for about a week, although the largest number of visitors arrive during the first four days. During the two visits of this Mela undertaken in 2018 and 2019, this researcher observed that a steady stream of families still brings their family members with some form of deformity to seek the blessings of Sati Ma. Sati Ma mela was once one of the largest meeting grounds of Bauls and Fakirs from Bengal who considered staying three nights at the Mela grounds to be a scared duty. Sudhir Chakraborty has written in detain about his experiences during Sati Ma Mela with Bauls (Chakraborty 2009). However, the Sati Ma mela encountered by the researcher was a radically altered one. Although there was no decline in the number of footfalls at the Sati Ma memorial and 'Himsagar', the sacred pond, the number of Bauls building temporary akadas and living on the ground has declined drastically. The mela, now being organized by Kalyani Municipality, is much smaller in size than the sprawling Agradwip mela and much more organized. The municipality organizes Baul programs for the evening during the fair at a designated stage, called 'Baul Mancha', facing an imposing statue of Lalon Fakir. Despite these allusions to a past connected with Bauls, one will be pressed to find any in the mela premises. A lot of ochre robe-wearing men sit around the fairground and smoke Marijuana. However, they are Kartabhaja followers and not Bauls. In fact, during the two visits, only two akhadas were observed by this researcher. One being the akhada of Fakir Osman, who are followers of Sati Ma, and he and his family are visiting here for many generations. Another being Ghoshpara Satimata Sangha, the only akhada situated within the inner precincts of the Sati Ma temple. Conversations with Osman Fakir revealed that although the custom of visiting Sati Ma's temple still holds value among some older Bauls or those who have a proper Baul guru (Personal Interview by Author 2019), but for most, the Mela is simply another venue for performing. This researcher saw many large pandals and stages being built outside the mela rea where Bauls will perform overnight, much like Agradwip. It was interesting to observe the active participation of various political parties in the organization of these unofficial Baul Mancha or stages. There was a clear tension regarding which party would occupy the best and closest open spaces to the Sati Ma temple. During this research, this was the only instance observed when Bauls were at the centre of local political activity. Although political parties commonly use Baul singers to perform at political programs as a means of keeping the gathered audience interested till the main speakers arrive, the Bauls never occupy a position of primary importance. Based

on the data gathered during informal interviews with the Bauls at Agradwip and Ghoshpara fair, a table is presented below, highlighting religious and caste identities of these Bauls, along with their primary profession. The table includes data from only twenty Bauls and no particular method of determining a sample size was followed. However, the respondents include Bauls of different gender, age and religion. Therefore, a few general observations can be made from the gathered data.

DATA GATHERED FROM BAULS AT AGRADWEEP AND GHOSH PARA FAIR YEARS 2018-21

Table 4.1

SERIAL NUMBER	AGE	GENDER	RELIGIOUS IDENTITY	INITIATION (DIKSHA)	PRIMARY SOURCE OF INCOME	CASTE IDENTITY (SC/ST/OBC/GENERAL/OBC)*
1	29	Male	Hindu	NO	Singing	SC
2	40	Male	Hindu	YES	Singing	SC
3	49	Male	Hindu	YES	Singing	GEN
4	37	Female	Hindu	YES	Singing	OBC-B
5	37	Male	Hindu	YES	Singing	SC
6	39	Male	No Religion/Baul way	YES	Singing	SC
7	42	Female	Muslim	YES	Singing	OBC-A
8	57	Male	Muslim	YES	Farming	OBC-A
9	45	Male	Hindu	YES	Singing	OBC-B
10	26	Female	Hindu	NO	Singing	SC
11	38	Male	No Religion/Baul way	YES	Singing	SC
12	49	Male	Hindu	YES	Singing	SC
13	47	Male	Muslim	YES	Singing	OBC-A
14	54	Male	Muslim	YES	Shopkeeper	OBC-A
15	28	Female	Hindu	NO	Singing	OBC-B
16	35	Male	Hindu	NO	Various odd jobs	OBC-B
17	44	Male	No Religion/Baul way	YES	Singing	SC
18	38	Male	Hindu	NO	Singing	GEN
19	46	Male	Muslim	YES	Singing	OBC-A
20	52	Male	Hindu	YES	Singing	SC

(Author's Personal Survey Data: Final publication date 10.04.2021)

Table 4.2

Number of Baul Respondents	**Number Owning Pucca House/Living in One**	**Number Owning Land**
20	14	05
Percentage of Total	70	25

(Author's Personal Survey Data: Final publication date 10.04.2021)

Few key observations made from above data:

Only two of the twenty Bauls studied belong to one of the upper castes. The number of Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Castes are similar, nine out of twenty. The number of OBC category Bauls is of course, helped by the fact that the West Bengal government has included most Muslim groups under the category of OBC-A and OBC-B. The numbers point to the predominantly lower caste identity of Bauls in West Bengal. Further, and interestingly, only three out of the twenty proclaimed the familiar Baul creed of there being no religion for the Baul, amounting to a mere 12% of the respondents adhering to the Baul way. The rest all identified to one or the other major religions. Even those who profess to not follow any of the major religions and the Baul way instead, readily identify their caste. Seventeen out of the twenty are professional, full-time Baul singers amounting to 68% of respondents, which points to a stark difference between the financial security of the elite Bauls and these humble performers.

The data presented above can be compared with a set of data obtained from Prof. Sudhir Chakrabarty's fieldwork, presented in his book 'Baul Fakir Katha' (Chakrabarty 2009). Although not limited to the Bauls of Nadia and Murshidabad, it may present an opportunity to observe whether the situation of Bauls have improved in the two decades since his study

took place. Chakrabarty provided a table of Baul and Fakirs of West Bengal, mentioning their profession, monthly income and their religious beliefs (including details of their initiation). This list is representative of only a fraction of the large number of Bauls and Fakirs he interacted with during the period of his research. Out of the twenty-five Bauls and Fakirs listed in the table he provided, only five are from Nadia and Murshidabad. However, considering the complete table, a comparison can be drawn between the religious and financial status of the Bauls across the four decades which divide his fieldwork from that of the present one. A table is presented below, extracting the data provided by Chakrabarty. The table is prepared considering the data gathered from a total of 25 (twenty-five) Bauls and Fakirs studied.

Table 4.3

Representation of data on Bauls and Fakirs from Prof. Sudhir Chakrabarty's Fieldwork during 1996-2002

	Number of Children More Than One	Singing as Source of Primary Income	Ownership of Pucca House	Ownership of Land	(Initiation Status: Count If not initiated in Baul way)	Experience of Foreign Tour or performing at premier venues in India
Out of 25	13	15	14	08	13	06
Percentage of total	52	60	56	32	52	24

(Source: Sudhir Chakrabarty, 'Baul Fakir Katha, 2009)

As this table of data reveals, two decades ago from the timeline of the present research, 60% of the Bauls interviewed indicated singing as their primary source of income. Concomitant data from Figure 4.1 shows 68% of Bauls relying exclusively on singing, indicating an increase of 8%, which, although not overtly significant, points to the worsening situation of the Baul singers in West Bengal. However, the percentage of Bauls initiated in the Baul way has reduced drastically from 52% as found in Figure 4.3 to a mere

12% as mentioned in Figure 4.1, signifying a drastic reduction in the number of initiated, and therefore, 'real' Bauls. The two indicators used by Chakrabarty to determine the socio-economic status of Bauls, namely, Ownership of Pucca House and Ownership of Land, when adjudged along with the data presented in Figure 4.2, reveals that whereas 56% of Bauls interviewed during the 2022 study enjoyed owning or living in a Pucca House, presently 70% of them are owning or living in one. Now, this can be construed as evidence of their economic success. However, it needs to be remembered that this increase might have to do with the general trend of more persons in West Bengal owning Pucca Houses due to the government schemes which subsidises one. On the other hand, the percentage of land ownership has come down significantly from 32% to 20%, pointing to an increasing state of financial insecurity on the part of the common Bauls.

An established Baul, with some education and a lineage to speak off, usually does not have to depend solely on earnings from Musical performances. Mansur Fakir, for example, is proud of the large tracts of land that his father Azhar Fakir owned. None of the well-established Bauls such as Sasti Das, Osman Fakir or Arman Fakir, are dependent on public performances for basic survival. The vulnerability of the common Baul singers, many of them pauperised after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, are being exploited by opportunistic program organizers who are paying them meagre amounts. Moreover, these Bauls are having to compromise with whatever sanctity or authenticity they might have tried to instil in their performances. This researcher has observed how the drunk audience members at both Melas became more unruly as the night progressed and demands for more sensational performances became louder. The Baul of Bengal is then seen to be dancing with cordless mike in hand, his ektara resting on the stage floor, to the beat of Bhojpuri songs, attempting a kind of on-stage remix of his songs with the deafening, upbeat music. Questionable female performers and even eunuch dancers may take the stage later, thereby completely ousting the Baul from his own performance.

Too Much of a Good Thing: Factors Responsible for the Ubiquity of Baul Music

Baul as a 'Sarkari' performer

West Bengal govt. has introduced a 'Lokprasar Scheme' in order to identify and benefit the folk musicians of Bengal. Under this flagship scheme of the department of Information and Cultural Affairs, a department headed by the Chief Minister herself, the scheme attempts to issue identity cards to all folk artists in order to bestow them with dignity as recognized artists and also to make it easier for government grants etc. to reach them. Presently, under this scheme, a monthly stipend of one thousand is being paid to the artists below sixty years of age and a similar amount is being paid to those over sixty as a pension. A further Rs. 1000 is paid to artists whom the government engages for its various social service outreach programs. This looks good on paper and seems like a genuine effort by the government to support folk artists like Bauls, many of whom are impoverished. However, the terminology used in the government website leaves room for some doubt as to how much dignity the government is really affording these artists and their art. The Rs. 1000 stipend is termed as a 'retainer' fee which effectively binds the 1,94,300 folk artists receiving this stipend to perform at any publicity campaign of the various government departments. Artists are also required to write songs praising a particular project or a department for whose publicity they are performing. With this policy in place, the state government has virtually bound the Bauls and all other folk musicians to perform for the government whenever and wherever it wishes for a paltry sum. This has resulted in an explosion of Baul and other folk performances at every government program where the officers and other dignitaries look on with mild interest as the once rebelling Baul tamely sings the praises of the government. The audience, mostly comprising common villagers, are also disinterested. This official view of Baul as simply another group of folk artists has taken the steam out of the Baul way of life, steeped in dissent. Bauls, of all hues, have now become performers on hire and not much else.

The dilution of 'Guhya Gyan' or secret knowledge

The secretive practices of the Bauls and their underlying philosophy of the body-centric universe, was considered as strictly reserved for the initiated Baul. The only way to receive such knowledge was the Guru. The Guru not only taught the Baul philosophy but also demonstrated the perfection of the secret sexo-yogic techniques for the trainees. Jha has termed this 'Nijer dehe dekhano' (demonstrating using one's own body). Since this knowledge did not exist in an explicit written format, the guru used riddles, parables and enigmatic songs (called dehatatwa songs, alternatively called Shabda Gan) to bestow this knowledge. Like most oral knowledge transmissions in traditional societies, the trainee or 'Sishwa' was challenged to use his intelligence and perceptivity to catch the meaning of these riddles. The guru was there, in the end, to help. It was strictly forbidden for Bauls to reveal this knowledge to a non-Baul although allusions to their inner world of such practices were often expressed in their songs. These songs were deliberately written in a way so as to obfuscate the underlying meaning to an outsider. In the present day, however, a large body of literature has emerged discussing in detail, these practices. Shaktinath Jha's book 'Bastubadi Baul' (Jha 1999) is particularly explicit in providing such details and these have been discussed already in the previous chapter on Bauls. On top of the fact that the educated Bengali is now fairly conversant with their age-old practices, two other forms of knowledge-dilution have emerged that may completely take the mystical away from the Baul identity.

The first of these is the numerous Baul-Fakir 'Mela' or fairs that have sprung up everywhere in West Bengal. The Baul Melas of the old had an intrinsic connection with the spiritual. Melas usually took place on grounds adjoining the graves of famous Baul or Fakir saints. Sometimes, the holy places of other folk-religions were also the chosen grounds for the Bauls. The Patharchapuri Data Baba Mela, The Joydeb Kenduli Mela, Agradwip Mela and Ghoshpara Sati Ma Mela, the four largest congregations of Bauls in West Bengal, all take place in such revered places and at specified times. However, with the support of the government and various other organizations, a host of newer Melas are being organized. The Lalon Mela in Bhimpur of Nadia is one example of a large scale modern Baul Mela. The principal difference between the traditional and new Melas lies in the way the Bauls

themselves treat theses occasions. Attending and staying at the old Melas is considered as a sacred duty for the Bauls, who often spend many days at such Melas living in makeshift huts or tents and performing overnight for an intimate circle of followers and admirers, as well as fellow Bauls. These Melas are where the Bauls socialize with each other, compare new songs, learn about the progress of each other's sadhana and even get introduced to new partners. In stark contrast, the newer Melas are devoid of any spiritual undertone and are completely performance-oriented affairs. In such Melas, the Bauls either arrive as invited and paid singers (in case of non-government Melas) or they are simply herded to arrive there by government officials, in case of a government-sponsored Mela. For a food packet and a pittance, they perform the hackneyed Baul songs, made popular through films or city-based folk performers to an insensitive audience which is there simply for entertainment. The government-sponsored Melas, in fact, present the most pathetic sights regarding the dignity of the Baul. Clearly unwilling performers, including even the most senior ones like Golam Fakir and Mansur Fakir, hurriedly finish their performance and get off the stage while the bureaucrats look on with great self-congratulation. Varun Khyapa once revealed that payments for such performances, already small, are often not readily received and one has to make many, many visits to the district Information and Culture department's office to receive their monthly stipends. Bauls are also being asked to perform for all sorts of public gatherings in the semi-towns and Mofussil towns of Nadia and Murshidabad. This researcher has observed Baul performances for events as varied as the foundation day of a club, the birthday of a local leader and celebrations for Manasha Puja (Author's observations 2019). What such insensitive and numerous Baul Melas and shows have achieved is overconsumption of Baul and folk music by the urban Bengali, who is now the principal patron of the Baul. Since a host of non-Baul performers are also singing and releasing Baul songs, this overconsumption is becoming even more acute, resulting in the inner messages of the Baul songs becoming mundane and banal. The eagerness of a section of Bauls to disclose their practices to any outsider who may be a prospective patron or donor is compounding the problem further.

But, for the purpose of the present topic of research, perhaps the most damaging and surprising change in the attitude of Bauls and Fakirs can be gauzed through the willingness

of some to present the inner teachings in large public functions, often in the form of a 'Palla Gan' or 'Tarja Gan' which is a long performance involving two or more Bauls who conduct the program in the manner of a contest involving a question-and-answer pattern. While the tradition of Palla Gan and Tarja Gan are quite old in Bengal, the related format of 'Pala Gan' being the most appreciated form of Vaishnava kirtan, the revealing of Baul's secrets through such musical vehicles is new. Such performances are not only performed before a wholly uninitiated audience but these are also video-recorded and posted on sites like YouTube for mass consumption. The level of sophistication often displayed in the audio recording, cinematography and editing of these performances reminds the viewer of the glossy commercialism that Bauls are heading to. Famous performers like Rehana Pervin and Samar Ejardar, both residents of villages near Karimpur town of Nadia, specialise in such performances. It is disheartening to see the audience and even the accompanying musicians on stage laughing and joking after a particularly 'provocative' detail of sadhana is revealed. Except providing for titillating entertainment, such performances seem to achieve little else.

Final Observation on Bauls

The Baul society that researchers like Sudhir Chakrabarty and Shaktinath Jha observed and became a part of is long gone today. The traditional village society has been unable to stem the tide of outside influence with the advent of cable television, cheap smartphones and availability of mobile internet connectivity even in the remote villages. Economically too, the villages have seen a drastic change as income from agriculture has fallen greatly due to the substantial rise in expenses related to modern farming machines, fertilizers and pesticides. This has resulted in greater number of villagers migrating seasonally within the country as skilled or unskilled laborers. A few men in almost every village, are found to work in the Gulf or in South East Asian countries as laborers. A lucky few who managed to find white-collar jobs in the towns after passing through Mofussil govt.-aided schools where quality of education has gone for a toss under the twin pressure of the huge number of students and the ever-increasing demands from the government to act as last-mile institutions for providing various types of social service, prefer to settle in the towns. A

traditional Baul, who depends on alms from villagers and plays the part of the 'wandering mystic' will be hard pressed to find sustenance from the village society of today.

Another reason for the disappearance of the sadhak Baul is related to the availability of the various avenues of entertainment to the common villager which was not available before the telecommunication revolution in India. Today, anyone sitting in a remote corner of Murshidabad, a district falling behind in most parameters of development, has the option to gratify his need for entertainment by watching an Instagram reel or a YouTube video ladling a package of crude humor, titillation and aspirational consumption that is impossible for the Baul to beat with his Ektara and Dugi. It is not surprising to find that a large number of digital content creators hail from rural areas and cater to rural sensibilities. Easy availability of unlimited and capricious entertainment has destroyed the original cultural significance of most rural art forms. Those who have survived did it in one of two ways, either they found patronization as a cultural symbol from the government or other influential organizations or transformed into an exportable and saleable commodity. The Bauls have taken both routes.

This is not a criticism of the Bauls or the cultural predisposition of the contemporary rural society of West Bengal. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the fact that the Bengali rural society has changed. It has become less informal, personal connections have become less intense. Despite the existing caste and religion-based divides, the traditional village society was able to act as a cohesive unit against the outsider. James C Scott, in his analysis of Asian agrarian societies has shown how the village headman was supposed to act as a barrier between the 'outsider' and the village, even using methods such as lying, bribing and cajoling. With introduction of local self-government, political divides have weakened this cohesiveness of the village. Power hierarchies have affected horizontal movement within the society. These factors, coupled with the success of materialism and consumerism in post-liberalization India, have greatly affected the Baul identity. It is hard to be the introvert exploring one's inner world when one needs to expose and advertise to survive. Bauls today, are adept at using social media to publicize their performances both public and private. A lesser known Baul like Ramen Bairagya avidly post photos of his jamming

sessions and his day-to-day life as that is the easiest way to connect with future benefactors who might provide shows.

However, this is not to claim that Baul sadhaks have disappeared completely. Earlier researchers like Chakrabarty have aptly pointed out to the dualist nature of Baul in their lifestyle. There is an 'Antaranga' or inner world and a 'Bahiranga' or outer world. In his outer world, a Baul may well behave like a normal person and carry out daily activities being a businessman or a farmer. But in his inner world, where entry is strictly restricted to those initiated with the Baul way, he may be a completely different person. This tendency to hide their true practices was born out of the real necessity of protecting their practices and culture from the oppression of Hindu and Muslim community leaders who viewed the excesses of the Baul life with malice and wanted to extinguish the traces of what they believed was a challenge to their traditional authority. Although for Hindu Bauls, the situation is quite different now, the habitual practice of safeguarding against intruders and outsiders persists for some Bauls.

It is hard to define and differentiate between a sadhak Baul and one who is not. Barun Khyapa, who professes to be a disciple of Bhaba Pagla, the famous Kali worshipper and divine madman who lived in Kalna near Nadia district is an example of one such Baul (Personal Interview by Author, 2020). Another veteran Baul, Madan Kana or Madan Das Bairagya, is also respected as one of the last members of the 'old school' who actually practice Baul sadhana (Ibid).

Present Situation of The Matuas

The data gathered on Matuas during fieldwork will be presented in two formats in this chapter. Firstly, excerpts from interviews taken of a few notable Matua personalities will be used to highlight the view of the elite section of the Matua society regarding the various socio-political and religious questions raised during this research. Secondly, tables containing data derived from a questionnaire method will be provided to present a clear picture of the contemporary position of the Matuas based on various indicators of their material progress as a community as well as their ability to retain the unique characteristics

of their faith and culture. An assessment will also be made from the data gathered regarding the level of political awareness and political participation of the Matuas. Then, a comparison will me drawn between the state of the Matuas in the present time and what it was before. It should be stated beforehand, that unlike the studies on Bauls, the previous data available on the Matuas or more specifically, the Namashudras, is quite ancient. Manosanta Biswas has even used 1931 census data in his book (Biswas, 2016). Therefore, the grounds of a longitudinal approach is shakier in the case of the Matuas than the Bauls. Much of the data presented here should be considered as a fresh initiative to determine the socio-political, financial and religious views of common Matuas.

Creating a Space for Radical Dalit Identity: The Achievements and Failures of the Matua Intellectual Elite

The creation of a section of well-educated and employed Matuas as the representative of their group has been discussed in the previous chapter. Therefore, in this chapter, their attempts towards reconciling with a pan-Indian Dalit identity will be taken up as a natural continuation of the previous chapter's discussion. Here it should be noted that the identity of Matua intellectual is a contested one. College education or success at finding a respectable white collared job does not automatically qualify one to claim intellectual status. Such a person must also, publicly participate in the political and social mobilizations of non-Brahminical, Ambedkarite section of the Matuas and forego any rituals or customs that may show any trace of the Vedic religion. For example, during the first visit of this researcher to Durgapur village near Majdia, Nadia, during a ceremony at the 'Hari Mandir' of a well-off Matua family (All three brothers in the household are central government employees), male members of the family who were interviewed didn't have any pretensions of intellectually representing the Matuas. As grounded members of the village community, they understood the inner differences existing between the Matuas and the day-to-day problems faced by the common rural Matuas, for whom, intellectual debates regarding the ideological position of the community means little. A majority of Matuas encountered and interacted with during this research cared little for the Ambedkarite intellectuals or adopting a Dalit identity. In light of the knowledge that the vast majority of Matuas engaged in

propagating a Dalit-centric, radical and dissenting view of the Matua religion and ideology are school or college teachers or government employees. It seemed to this researcher that the reservation policy-induced facilities at government job market being enjoyed by a section of Matuas have somewhat alienated them from the rest of their society. Government jobs carry immense prestige in Matua villages and those who manage to grab one, immediately become distinguished in the eyes of others and not least, of himself. There lies the first serious challenge of a Matua intellectual in propagating his views and mobilising the common Matuas under the banner of an anti-Brahminical political movement.

The second problem faced by the Matua intellectuals comes, once again, from within. A section of influential Matuas at the village level act as de-facto gurus (despite Guruvada being forbidden for Matuas) and carry on in a way quite similar to that of a Vaishnava Gosai or guru. These gurus are known by various names such as 'Dalapati', 'Gosai', 'Sadhu' or 'Thakur'. They utilise the newfound awareness among a section of the educated Matuas regarding the inessential character of employing Brahmin priests or following Vedic rituals by presenting themselves as an alternative. Through a set of semi-Brahminical rituals created in the recent past, these Matua gosains have secured an alternative earning for themselves. Such local elements are obviously a big hurdle for the essentially atheist section of Matua intellectuals. To address the problem, the Matua intellectuals had to compromise and accept the divinity and superiority of Harichand Thakur as supreme God, as claimed in his hagiography, 'Harililamrita'. However, the same text claims in repeatedly the Avatara lineage of Harichand Thakur in accordance to Brahminical and Gaudiya Vaishnava texts. This poses a dilemma for the Matua intellectual who is forced to claim to his Matua audience that parts of Harililamrita, and a large section of 'Guruchand Charit, the hagiography of Guruchand Thakur, are latter additions by opportunistic Brahminical elements (Interview with N. Mohanta, 2020). Such a claim is hard to accept for the common, religious Matua who hold both books in the highest esteem. In the absence of any revealed knowledge, the texts of these two books constitute the core of the Matua religious beliefs. Any attempts by the new Matua elite to undermine their authority is bound to fail. Then there comes the challenge from within the thin stratum of Matua intellectual class itself. A section of them is not convinced about certain key aspects of 'Matuaism' which puts their entire identity as a modern and radical Dalit intellectual group to question.

Eminent Matua scholars such as Dr. Nandadulal Mohanta, who is the first ever Ph.D. degree holder in the Matua community is not convinced regarding the non-Brahmin origin of Harichand Thakur. Dr. Birat Bairagya, another eminent Matua scholar is too keen to preside over Matua marriages, funerals and other religious rituals to truly commit to a radical outlook. The preeminent Matua intellectual leader of Bangladesh, Dr. Haraprasad Bagchi acknowledges the supreme divinity of Harichand Thakur. Another scholar, Nakul Mallick, seem to focus almost exclusively on the experience of partition rather than solidifying the Matua identity in West Bengal. Therefore, it seems apparent that Matua intellectuals are a diverse lot and do not show characteristics conducive to the formation of more organized Dalit groups such as the Dalit Intellectual Collective (DIC). Lalitha Natraj cites the example of the Karnataka based DSS or Dalit Sangarsh Samity whose top leader's intransience on certain critical issues led the common members of the group demonstrating for accountability from their own leaders (Nataraj, 1982).

Gopal Guru, in his analysis of the Dalit intellectual tradition (Guru and Geetha, 2000), points to the many shortcomings of their approach such as establishing a halo around the figures of Ambedkar or Phule which renders them as infallible champions of the Dalit. Such thinking eradicates the possibility of self-criticism and finds itself unable to show the flexibility that is required to appeal to the mass followers of a lower caste led protest religion like Matua. Guru quotes Romila Thapar to question the very basis of Dalit identity and whether that identity is still relevant and applicable all sections of the present Dalit-Bahujan samaj. A section of the Matua intellectuals such as Barui, who take a class-based approach in addressing the problem of inequality of Matuas can feel chagrin at Guru's criticism of the left-oriented class-based approach of some Dalit leaders. He supports the view that Dalit is above all, a cultural construct created by Dalits themselves through their experiences and interactions as a method to express themselves.

The Matua intellectuals interviewed below, will present their viewpoints regarding the key topics such as the present political status of the Matuas, their financial status and aspirations for social inclusion in brief. Along with these, they can also serve as a template for the considerable diversity of opinion existing between the educated section of the Matuas regarding the strategy for acquainting the common Matua with their point of view.

Interview with a Matua Leader

This interview was taken at the residence of Dr. Nandadulal Mohanta at Amghata village of Nadia district on 4th of February, 2020. Mohanta was born in 1932 in a village named Goalgram near Orakandi. His family came to West Bengal almost immediately after partition and he was enrolled in Katwa College. Mohanta joined a secondary school as teacher in 1961 and served in the capacity of Head Master for a long time before retiring. He obtained his Ph.D. degree from Kalyani University' folklore department, the first Ph.D. scholar of that department, in 1992. For a long time, he has served as a the president of All India Matua Mahasangha, the largest and oldest organization of Matuas in West Bengal. As such, Mohanta is close toa section of the Thakur family, who are descendants of Harichand Thakur. Mohanta is not entirely against Vedic practices and acknowledges the merit of some of these practices, sans the sacred authority of the Brahmins, can be beneficial for maintaining the solidarity of the Matua society (Personal Interview by Author 2020). Mohanta considers Matua religion as a sect or 'Sampraday' within Hinduism and not as a separate religion. He is, however, of the view that it is a continuation of an indigenous expression of the folk religion of the original inhabitants of this land which were later appropriated by Hinduism. He considers Matua sect to be for the benefit of all backward people, and not for the Namashudra alone. In fact, he considers the Namashudra pride associated with Matua faith to be problematic as Matua once included a sizable number of non-Namashudra people as well, including famous Muslim devotes such as Tinkari Molla. He is also against the overtly radical section of the educated Matuas as he considers their project to be singularly aimed towards destroying the edifice of the established Matua way, without any clue about rebuilding an alternative. He agrees that Matua is essentially a religion of protest against established religions which denied the formerly untouchables their basic rights. However, he points out that the uniqueness of Matua lies in its ability to evolve and reform itself, which other protest sects failed to do. Mohanta considers 'Dehasadhana' as a natural extension of all folk religions, especially those which originated from eastern India. He has discussed in detail about the relation of Dehasadhana and the Matua sect in his book 'Matua Andolan o Dalit Jagaran' (Mohanta, 2002). Interestingly, he firmly denies any connection between Buddhism and Matua and consider those

Ambedkarites who are attempting to find common ground between the two as misguided. Like other Matua intellectuals, Mohanta is selective in his acceptance of Harililamrita and mentions the Brahminical and Vaishnava leanings of the book's original editor Haribar Sarkar to prove his point that the book was tampered with during publication. Apparently, this last information was given to Mohanta by P.R. Thakur himself.

Living outside the group: the insecurities of a famous Matua family

Subrata Halder is the grandson of Mahananda Halder who was one of the primary associates of P.R. Thakur and author of 'Guruchand Charit'. Mahananda Halder was also a twice-elected MLA and former deputy speaker of West Bengal Legislative Assembly. He resides at Palashipara village in Nadia, at the house built by Mahananda Halder himself during the 60's (Personal Interview by Author 2019). Subrata Halder, his two brothers, including the well-known Matua organizer Sukriti Sundar Halder and his mother Mira Halder are the preeminent Matua leaders in the village and nearby areas. The decision to interview the Halder family was influenced by the fact that Mahananda Halder turned against P.R. Thakur and established a rival centre for Matuas at Palashipara. After the demise of Mahananda Halder, the attraction and importance of the place have diminished but still, a lot of Matua devotees arrive every year to participate in the three main festivals observed. These are Holi, Ras Jatra and Baruni Mela, which is celebrated fifteen days after the more famous one at Thakurnagar. This list of festivals is interesting on its own as it indicates a Vaishnava interpretation of Hrichand Thakur's religion and equates him with other Vaishnava avataras. However, Subarata Halder claims that no Brahmin priest is employed during these festivals and the Matua character of these festivals is still intact. He acknowledges that Brahmins priests are employed in his family during the last rites ceremony of family members (Ibid). At the same time, he maintains that marriages in his family have taken place according to non-Vedic Matua customs. He vouches that similar customs are also followed among common Matuas of the nearby villages. This perplexing stance regarding partial acceptance of Brahminism can be explained by remembering that last rites are often conducted according to the last wishes of the dying person. The older generation of Matuas, even among the educated families, are not particularly keen on accepting anti-Vedic rituals propagated by the younger, educated Matuas. Subrata Halder laments that the local Muslims

are nowadays creating problems during the observation of festivals like Holi and Ras Jatra and because of that, the route for Holi or Ras processions are now cut short, so as to avoid carrying out a procession near Muslim households or mosques (ibid). This is a rare admission of Matuas facing problems in observing their rituals because of a Muslim refusal to cooperate. As data presented later in this chapter will reveal, the instances of Matuas feeling troubled or threatened by Muslim groups, even in the areas bordering Bangladesh, are very few. Perhaps what explains the difference in the experience of Halder and most Matuas is the fact that Matuas in Nadia and North 24 Parganas usually live in close-knit villages and at this village level, they are extremely connected and organized. Therefore, the section of Muslims which usually creates such problems dare not approach them. However, in a village like Palashipara, where Hindus are a clear minority, the story can be quite different.

Interacting with the Matua and the Vaishnava : Interview of different persons taken at Purbanoapara Village

During this interview taken on 21st December, 2019 at Purbanoapara village near Aranghata, Nadia at the house of Rebati Ranjan Biswas, multiple people were interviewed who were chosen by the Matuas of the village to speak on their behalf (Personal Interview by Author 2019). Therefore, the subjects represent both sections of the elite Matuas which this researcher has classified earlier. The host, Rebati Ranjan, is a retired high school teacher. Other persons interviewed included Prafulla Biswas, retired government servant and Bibhuti Bhakta, the local Matua Gosain and Dalapati. Rebati Ranjan, the most educated among the subjects and well connected to the Namashudra and Matua organizations attempting to advance the Dalit identity for the Matuas, is vocal about the discriminations still being faced by the Matua Namashudras and the gross discriminations that they faced earlier, when most Matuas migrated from East Pakistan during the early 60's. Biswas revealed that even today, the upper caste residents of the Aranghata town carefully avoid staying in areas where a large number of Namashudras live. They even use a code word for the Namashudras, which is 'Noy Number', or 'Number Nine'. The etymology of that term is unknown to Mr. Biswas. He further revealed that the area has a history of violent scuffles breaking out between the upper castes (most upper caste Hindus in Aranghata area are

Vaishnavas, the Aranghata Jugal Kishore temple being one of the oldest Gaudiya Vaishnava temples in the state) and the Matuas. The latest of such scuffles took place recently, after the announcement of a public holiday by the state government on the occasion of the birthday of Harichand Thakur (Personal Interview by Author 2019).

Prafulla Biswas, although not as vitriolic as Rebati Ranjan, attests to the fact that the local Vaishnavas, predominantly belonging to the relatively wealthy, land-owning Mahishya and Sadgope sub-castes, practised a form of untouchability against the Matuas until recently. They complained that during the turbulent period immediately preceding and after the Bangladesh Liberation War, a lot of these local Hindus helped Muslims living further near the border to flee inland near Aranghata. However, their attitude towards the Matuas didn't change at all (Ibid).

Bibhuti Bhakta, the Matua Gosain, received the least formal education among the three subjects. However, he is literate and able to read Bengali newspapers comfortably. Bhakta gives further evidence of this discrimination by recounting how, when he was much younger, the local Vaishnavas didn't even let them share the common ponds and forbade them from entering the local temple. He states that even today, when a Vaishnava neighbour invites a Namashudra for a social or religious program, the 'Prasad' is literally thrown from a distance to the plate of the Namashudra, so as to avoid any pollution through touch. At this, the gathered common Matuas also firmly supported Bhakta by stating that almost all of them have suffered similar experiences in such situations. By this time, another 'Dalapati' named Ranjan Ranga joined Sri Bhakta and together, they revealed what was going to be a new viewpoint on part of the researcher regarding the political and social consciousness of those who are considered as 'common' Matuas. Both Gosains claimed, to the vocal support of the gathered villagers, that Matuas need not be taught about eschewing Brahminical practices by the urban educated Matuas. They can understand the oppression of Brahminism in their own capacity and therefore, reject Brahmin priests for conducting most rituals in their households. The elements of dissent are also present in the rituals themselves. For example, during any festival or Puja, a Matua is obligated to first offer prayers to and worship his or her parents as living embodiments of God. During the funeral of a Matua, not only the eldest son but all the children of the deceased perform the

'Mukhagni' or the ritual of kindling the funeral pyre. The Hari Mandir, which every Matua establishes in his house, either as a separate small temple in the yard or inside the house, should not place images of any other deity or guru above those of Harichand or Guruchand Thakur (the researcher is sceptical about the veracity of this claim, the reasons for which will be discussed shorty). However, the most stunning statement made by the two, supported by all assembled, was a complete rejection of Buddhism that the proponents of an Ambedkarite Dalit identity for Matuas are attempting to force on them. They revealed that in Buddhist texts written in Bengal, the Buddhists have expressed very low opinion about Namashudras. They were depicted as uncivilised dog meat eaters and painted in a very negative colour (Ibid). Bhakta further argued that although Guruchand Thakur was influenced by both Budhhism and Islam when he initiated the Namashudra rejuvenation movement from Orakandi, there is absolutely no contemporary evidence that either he or Harichnad Thakur were ever influenced by Buddhism. Therefore, those who are attempting to connect Dalit Buddhist theology with the Matua religion, are doing it for their own designs.

Data Obtained from Surveys Conducted at Purbanoapara, Bahirgachi and Duttapulia Villages

Although the methods and rationale for the survey has been discussed previously, the reasons for choosing the abovementioned three villages in particular needs to elaborated before going into the task of analysing retrieved data. All three villages, lying within Ranaghat- II block under Ranaghat Uttar Purba Vidansabha constituency, have a high concentration of scheduled caste people according to the 2011 census. Out of this Purbanoapara village is administered by Kamalpur Panchayaet and both Bahirgachi and Duttapulia villages are administered by Panchayets bearing the same name. This detail will be important shortly. Now, according to the 2011 census data, Purbanoapara has a population of 3542 with a literacy rate of 80.82% and the percentage of persons belonging to sScheduled Caste category stands at 70.07%. Duttapulia and Bahirgachi villages have a population of respectively, 13562 and 9785. While Duttapulia has a literacy rate of 80.85% and the percentage of the SCs of the populations stands at 57.69%, the corresponding figures for Bahirgachi stand at 80.64% and 97% (approximately). Now, the reason why the

latter villages seem to host an unnaturally large population is because of a possible conflation in the census data regarding the village and the Panchayet, which shares the same name, and includes other villages within its' jurisdiction. In fact, the definition of village is very loosely constructed in Article 243(G) of the Indian Constitution. The standard definition, according to this article is, "a village specified by the Governor to be village and includes a group of villages so specified". The vague nature of the article, coupled with the complexities arising out from the Governor classifying any bunch of rural habitations as a village and the clash of jurisdiction between an officially defined village and a 'Revenue Village' have attracted the court's attention (State Of U.P. & Ors. Etc. vs Pradhan Sangh Kshettra Samiti & Others, 1995). Uttar Pradesh High Court was highly critical of the arbitrary power resting in the hands of the Governor regarding the classification of villages. Thus, it is important to mention that the latter two villages under survey were much smaller and hosted a limited population of approximately 2000-2300, according to unofficial assessment made using local voter rolls. The sample size collected from each village, calculated on the basis of households, stand approximately at 14% of their populations. While data from three villages can't be termed to be representative of the large geographical area that Matuas occupy in the district of Nadia, they can nevertheless be an important tool to have a basic idea of their socio-political and religious status and views as a whole.

Table 4.4

NATURE OF CASTE-BASED DISCRIMINATIONS FACED

WHETHER FACED DISCRIMINATION (YES OR NO) AND TYPE	**Percentage of Total**
No	52.70
Yes	
Discrimination at workplace	10.82
entering a temple or mandap	24.31
social discrimination during marriage or festivities etc.	6.76
Use of common resources	5.41

(Source: Survey conducted by the researcher. Period: 10/03/2019-26/03/2019)

The previous table represents the continuing problem of discriminations of various types faced by the Matua Namashudras in the present day. Considering the narrative of caste-

based discrimination being almost absent in the state, it is shocking and revealing that almost 25% of the respondents stated that they have faced discrimination while entering a temple or a puja mandap which is considered as a most serious form of punishable discrimination under the Fundamental Rights of the Indian constitution.

Table 4.5

GENDER-BASED ANALYSIS OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

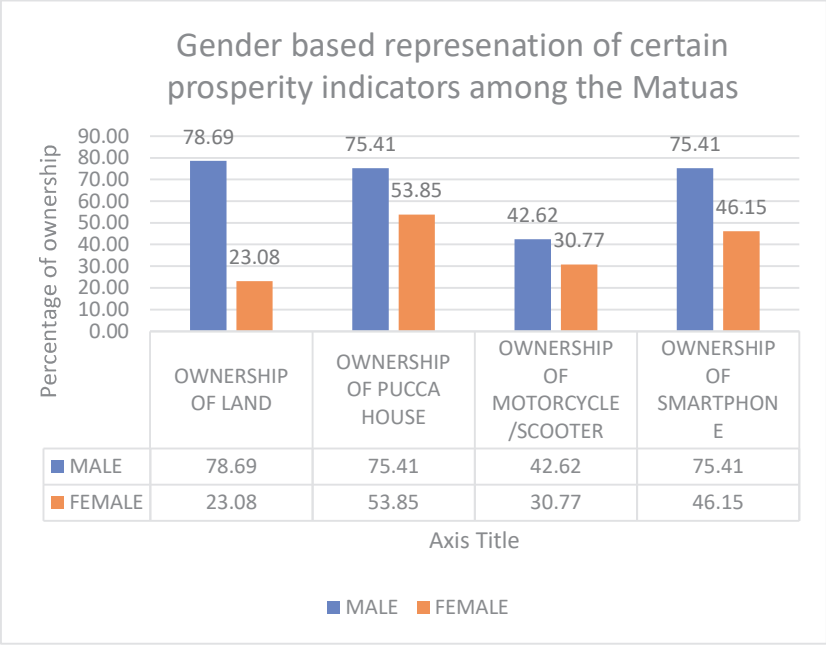
Female	
Below 8th standard	7.69
Graduate	8.79
HS	8.39
Illiterate	37.36
Madhyamik	23.08
passed 8th but below Madhyamik	14.08
Male	
Below 8th standard	10
Graduate	25
HS	1.67
Illiterate	33.33
Madhyamik	13.33
passed 8th but below Madhyamik	6.67
Post Graduate	10

(Source: Survey conducted by the researcher. Period: 10/03/2019-26/03/2019)

In terms of educational advancements and opportunities, as the table shows, women are not lagging significantly behind in these villages compared to men. Although the rate of illiteracy is higher than that of men, but the percentage of passing the Secondary and Higher Secondary Examination is significantly higher. However, it is also observed that none of the women surveyed held a post-graduate degree and the percentage graduate women is significantly lower than their male counterparts. This may indicate that although at the school level, education of women has gained traction, in accordance with the emphasis placed on women's education by the founders of the sect, but their higher education is neglected. Even the socially active and politically visible Matua women can't escape the trajectory of rural women being married off and taken from the workforce at a relatively

early age. Another interesting observation that emerges from the above data is the wide gap between the official census data and the data derived on ground. While the average of the literacy rates of the three villages according to Census 2011 stands at approximately 80.66% (Census 2011, Registrar General of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India), the table above reveals a combined literacy rate of the males and females which falls well below 70%. The previously discussed conflation of data in the two villages may be responsible for this mismatch.

Figure 4.1



(Source: Survey conducted by the researcher. Period: 10/03/2019-26/03/2019)

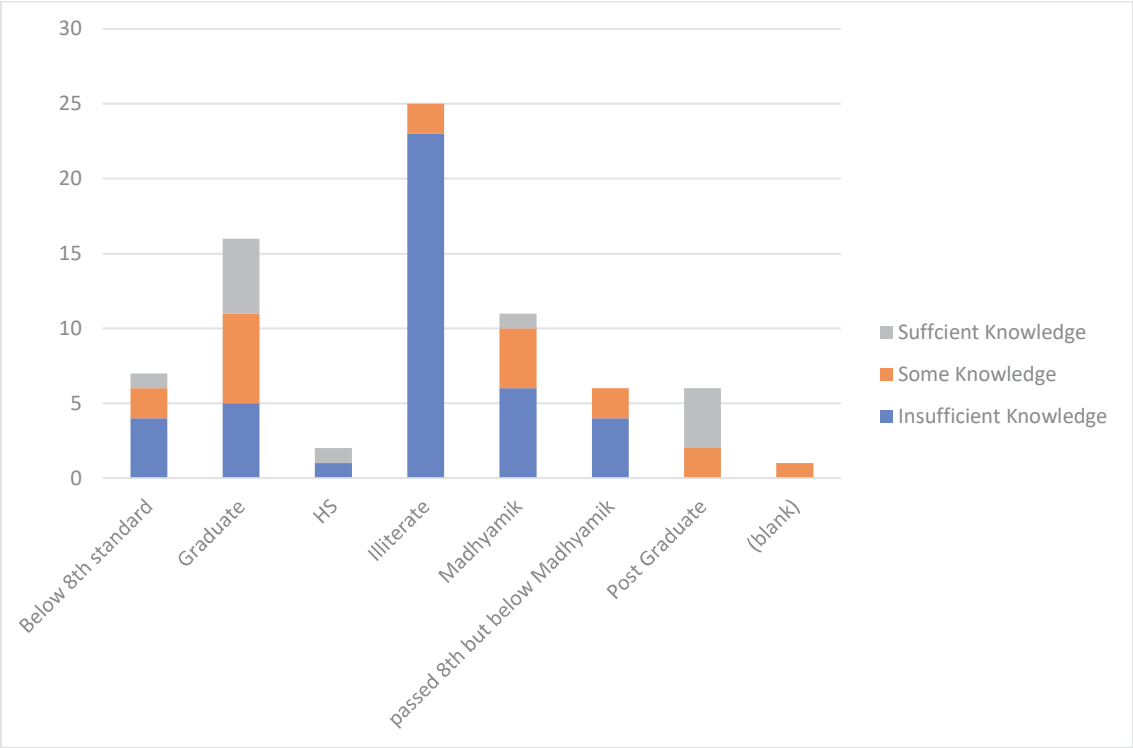
The data presented in the preceding page in the form a bar chart further displays the disparity between the genders in terms of enjoying certain material possessions indicative of their progress in terms of economic well-being. However, the males, who are often the principal bread earners in the household, seem to score well on all indicators, signifying a healthy economic situation of the Matuas in general.

The following three tables, presented in succession below, deal with an interesting and critical part of the researcher's primary enquiry, i.e., the ability of the Matuas as a dissenting sect to maintain their identity. As the data reveals, a large percentage of Matuas reject the

attempts of a section of the Matua elite to weave elements of Buddhism and Ambedkar's philosophy in the body of the Matua beliefs .

Figure 4.2

KNOWLEDGE OF AMBEDKAR AMONG MATUAS: BASED ON EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION



(Source: Survey conducted by the researcher. Period: 10/03/2019-26/03/2019)

Above data reveals that perceptions regarding Ambedkar are quite limited and basic among the less educated Matuas. Although Graduates and Post Graduates do seem to have abetter grasp of his ideas and movement, that knowledge does not translate into beliefs that can move the Matuas towards a more general Dalit identity. The tables below might point to that conclusion.

Table 4.6

ACCEPTANCE OF HARICHAND THAKUR AS AN INCARNATION OF BUDDHA

Row Labels	Percentage of Matuas considering Harichand Thakur an incarnation of Buddha (Approx)
Both are incarnations	10.81
Can't Say	10.81
No	75.68
Not Applicable	1.35
Yes	1.35

(Source: Survey conducted by the researcher. Period: 10/03/2019-26/03/2019)

Table 4.7

Labels	Percentage of Matuas reacting to "Should Matuas identify primarily as Hindus"
Can't Say	5.26
No	36.84
Yes	57.89

(Source: Survey conducted by the researcher. Period: 10/03/2019-26/03/2019)

The data presented above, within the limitations that a smaller sample size necessitates, points to the failure of the Matua Dalit consciousness in penetrating the lower strata of Matua society. Of particular interest is the outcome that a clear majority of more than 57% of Matuas consider themselves to be Hindus, despite a large number of them not adhering to typical Hindu practices and customs.

Final Observations on Matuas

After a long period of forced absence from West Bengal's political landscape, the politics of caste has once again gained prominence after independence. The regression into shadows of the Namashudra-Matua political aspirations that began with the electoral defeat of P.R. Thakur had ended with the recognition of Matuas accorded by the Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee government. During the Trinamool Congress government, Matuas have only grown in stature as a pressure group in one hand and active controllers of the fate of political parties in at least four districts of south Bengal, on the other. The present study has revealed certain key factors regarding the present status of Matuas. Firstly, the present literacy rate of

Matuas is correspondent to the national average of about 66% decided from 2011 census (Census 2011, Registrar General of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India). That means that little progress in terms of literacy of adults were made in the last ten years. Ownership of land and pucca house for males is above 75%, which points to the relative financial security enjoyed by Matuas considering a hundred million households in the country is considered landless, amounting to three hundred million landless individuals (Draft National Land Reform Policy 2013, Department of Land Resources, Government of India). Ownership of aspirational and technological goods such as motorcycles or smartphones points to their connectedness with each other and the 'outside' world. Matuas are a multifaceted group who embody the many different shades of identity politics in India. Certain expressions of their political consciousness is in sync with the larger Dalit political identity building which gained traction in India since the emergence the Lohiaite movement in north India. However, the currents of radical though has not been able to significantly alter the core of their dissent which is still cantered around their rejection of Brahminism and the recreating of a reversed cosmology which establishes Harichnad Thakur, the founder above all traditional Hindu deities. The fact that a majority of Matuas still consider themselves to be Hindus may not be an indicator of their loss of identity, rather their willingness to challenge the intransigence of orthodox Hinduism in its own ground.

Matuas and the Bauls: A comparative assessment of their contemporary social situation

Data derived from field work on the Bauls and Matuas reveal that both groups are similarly poised in terms of material well-being. However, before coming to a generalised conclusion regarding the matter, one has to keep in mind the relatively small number of Baul respondents as compared to the Matuas. In fact, in light of the vastly small number of Bauls in contrast to Matuas living in west Bengal, comparisons involving economic indicators have little value. However, that data is important for each of the groups to assess their own socio-economic situation. In a comparison, the attitudes of the two groups regarding their faiths will be of more pertinence. While an attempt has been made in this chapter to introduce an empirical standard to assess the views of the Matuas regarding different matters of their faith, the same has not been done in the case of Bauls. Rather, their contemporary attitude to their own belief system has been structured through informal

interactions and interviews as the limited number of subjects made interviews as a richer source for information and insights. Whatever may be the method, the insights acquired point to a process of rarefication of the ideals of both sects which have turned into dogmas rather than living embodiments of practised beliefs. One significant difference regarding the reaction of the two groups against the inroads of 'modernity' in the form of a capitalist market economy and new systems of mass communication seems to be that, while the Bauls have not been able to maintain the spirit of their sect and assimilated within a market for folk entertainment, the Matuas have tamed and utilised the forces of modernity for their own advancement and benefit. In terms of social standing and experiences of discrimination, the Matuas, despite their advancements, still seem to reel under their Chandala/Namashudra identity. Instances of denial of temple entry or use of public services were virtually non-existent among Bauls. Thus, it seems that the hatred of the Hindu society for Bauls due to their peculiar lifestyle and ritual practices have been overcome by the newly forged identity of Baul as a cultural symbol. Whether it is a victory or defeat for the Baul is a subjective matter but it can be said with a degree of certainty that the dilution of their identity in lieu of broad social acceptability has cost the Baul their inner world. The Matuas, boldly moving forward with their identity broadly intact, has much more potential to emerge as a minor tradition which may transform its' Great Tradition so that it becomes more receptable to the Matua's claim of equal opportunity.

Before ending this chapter, which is largely based on on-the-ground fieldwork and observations, one important fact needs to be recounted. There exists a world of information and perception that presents itself free from any structured form or methodology which can offer glimpses into the world of subjects that was not revealed during formal communications. For example, in a Matua village where a majority of respondents expressed that they do not follow Brahminical practices at their home, which they equated with worship of common Hindu deities, this researcher found idols of Radha-Krishna, Kali and other Hindu deities being worshipped in almost every household. In the house of one of the key respondents, who holds important political portfolio and a keen activist for the 'revival' of the Matua faith from its Brahminism-induced slumber, this researcher has observed an elaborate temple for goddess Kali. At the house of another Matua respondent, the 'guru' of that family went into a supposedly trance state and started to offer boons,

whereas reliance on such type of magic is typically discouraged by the Matua founders. Claims of Baul identity being all about universal love and humanism may sound hollow in the face of what one can observe as the dominant expression of popular culture which is completely insensitive to such exalted notions.

CONCLUSION

In these chapters discussed above, this thesis has attempted to find answers to the original research questions posited at the beginning of the research. These questions were about how the two dissenting sects of the Bauls and the Matuas emerged as groups of the lower castes excluded from the Varna system within the framework of major religions and how they carved a space for their own cultural and religious expressions in opposition to the major religions which denigrated their very existence. The Bhakti and Sufi oriented theological background, underscored in the research questions, has been discussed adequately in the chapters. The 'Namashudra' identity of the Matuas, which incorporates not only a 'Jati' based identification but also cultural and spatial ones, the Namashudra being a group which was traditionally tied to the farmlands and rivers of certain districts of East Bengal. As to the final and perhaps, most pertinent research questions, i.e., an inquiry into why the reactions of the Matuas and Bauls differed so significantly in the face of hegemonic advances by the major religions, the answers are not entirely straightforward. In terms of creating new, alternative and nonconformist cosmologies which upended the traditional Varna-based social hierarchies, both these groups or sects display similar proclivities. Both groups use deliberately ambiguous terminologies in their songs to conceal their secret, deviant religious practices. Despite such congruities, the most significant point of departure between the two group's approaches can be observed in their relationship with the modern state. The pre-colonial Indian state, as it existed in Bengal, did not differentiate between state and religion. Major religions, even if they were not the religion of the ruler, received state patronage to a great degree and deviants faced the wrath of state. As such, the deliberate veil of ambiguity that was used as a shield by the Bauls against the state as well as the major religions was essential to survive in that era. The character of the colonial and the independent Indian state being based on free expression of beliefs, the necessity of adopting such techniques have become remote. Although in the case of Muslim Fakirs, the fear of persecution from the clergy is present, the state and the civil society have emerged as benefactors and saviours which has largely transformed the dissent of Bauls into an appreciated cultural artefact. Since the emergence of Matuas took place not in a pre-colonial state but under the British Raj, the necessities and means of survival have been very different. Instead of the introspective attitude developed by the Bauls from an early age, the

Matuas developed an outward and materialistic outlook instead. The realisation that state power was not an enemy but a means to overcome the parochial barriers erected by the caste system, the Matuas have successfully utilised the colonial state for recognition. Therefore, the history of the Matua sect is one which is insuperable from the history of the colonial rule in Bengal and the subsequent freedom movement. The organizational capacity and political acumen of the Matuas, emerging as a result of their experience as a dissenting sect, is the definitive factor which distinguishes them from the Bauls.

This study entitled 'Minor Traditions' of dissent begins with an introduction to the concept of sociology of region in an Indian context and further delves into a discussion about the concepts of cult and sect and the problems in defining and limiting these categories. The introductory chapter also briefly deals with secularization theory and whether de-secularization is an essential link to modernity, when modernity is understood in a western context. Identifying the Baul and the Matua groups as part of an existing system of classification forms an important part of the introduction. In this regard, the concept of Folk region and charismatic religion have been discussed. However, identifying either Baul or Matua as a folk religion or as a charismatic religion turns out to be an inadequate classification of these groups since they embody certain facets of both and some characteristics which are unique to them. For example, if the emergence of Baul as a distinct branch of Sahajiya Vaishnavism is accepted, then Chaitanya Deva can be construed as the founder of a charismatic religion, of which the Baul is a relatively recent iteration. However, the link between Vaishnavism as it existed during Chaitanya's time and Sahajiya Vaishnavism is tenuous and evidences linking the two are not conclusive. This classificatory scheme becomes even more complex in the case of Matuas. There exists two distinct school of thoughts among the Matuas where one school believes in a continuation from Chaitanya's Bhakti-vada to the emergence of Harichad Thakur as a successor of Chaitanya. But there is another school among the Matuas which rejects the claims to a Vaishnava relation to Harichad Thakur. This second school attempts to discover a Buddhist heritage for the Matuas instead. Now, the Baul philosophy is supposedly a secular one where both Hindu and Muslim Bauls eschew the limitations of their birth religion to follow the Humanistic Baul philosophy. But a closer scrutiny reveals that religion has not been subsumed by the Baul identity, especially in the context of the two districts of Nadia and

Murshidabad of West Bengal, which are the focus areas of the present study. Although, the instances of Hindu Baul gurus having Muslim disciples and vice-versa is not entirely uncommon in this region but they fail to create a pattern which can challenge the clearly distinct identities of Hindu Bauls and Muslim Fakirs.

A comparative study of two such groups is hard to undertake without devising some scheme of classification first as the previously discussed classifications fall short, this study has attempted to find out whether the more basic classification of a cult or a sect may apply to these two groups. Since, the concept of a cult is a relatively new construct in the Western world and academic discussions on the subject seem to determine the period since the 1960s as the beginning of a timeline to study cults. Cults in the western context have a universally pejorative connection and they are associated with secret and anti-social practices. However, such practices may also be understood as a form of protest against the rigidity of organized religions, something which looks like Baul and Matua also attempts, in their own ways. Classifying as a sect is also problematic since sect is equal to a religious denomination the context of Europe. In the Indian context, the difference between a cult and a sect can be very difficult to determine since any cult with a historical and charismatic founder may later claim to be a new sect within an established religion, with a further claim of representing a purified or fundamental version of the principal religion.

A further layer of complexity in locating Baul or Matua within a recognised classificatory scheme is encountered when the all-important factor of Caste identity is taken into question. Since, in the Indian context caste is the most significant line of division for unequal distribution of social, political and economic privileges since their rarefication of the original varna system, the caste identity of these groups needed to be reconciled with their identity as sects. Following the arguments raised by scholars like Romila Thapar and Mary Searle-Chatterjee, it has been proposed that the identification of sect and caste are not mutually exclusive. As the examples of the Lingayats and the Ramanuja- Panthi reveals a particular caste can almost entirely be the follower of a particular Guru or leader and develop a distinct set of beliefs and rituals which can classify them as a sect.

In contemporary India the identity of caste is further divided into separate Jati identities, which are groups differentiated on the basis of their traditional livelihood. Since the Varna system contained only four varnas and the caste system loosely followed the varna scheme they are inadequate to grasp the complexity of the Indian social scene comprising thousands of Jatis existing under a single caste and differing in their rituals as well as their relative position in the purity-pollution scale, in different geographical locations within India.

A modern and extremely significant category of identity that has been discussed is the Dalit identity which essentially politicizes the traditional caste and Jati identities and emerges as an agent of social transformation in contemporary India. Since the history of Matuas clearly incorporate a struggle for social and political recognition in colonial and post-colonial India, the Dalit identity is very much relevant for them. The case of the Bauls is more nuanced and interesting. Since most upper caste Vaishnavas were able to re-define Chaitanya's message of equality to suit their purpose, they did not join the Sahajiya Vaishnavas who were rebelling against the early 17th century orthodoxy of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Therefore, most Bauls not only identify as lower-castes but the emergence of their sect itself carries a measure of rebellion against the upper caste. Despite that Bauls lack the social cohesion and the political will or ambition to be considered as a part of the Dalit identity, which is essentially combative and political in nature.

In light of the limitations in choosing any one of the identities for these two groups, a new identity as dissenting groups under the category of 'minor traditions' has been advanced. Now, the definition of dissent in a socio-political context has been elaborated and the different explanations given to the act of dissent by scholars such as Thapar, Dorfman and Falk have been taken up. The principal argument regarding the use of the dissent discourse have been informed by the view of dissent as an essentially hidden protest against a powerful religious or political adversary. Scott's concept of Infrapolitics is an example of such hidden dissent which does not use the language or the conceptual expressions of those in power and therefore this kind of dissent does not register as active protest. The other form of dissent is visible, more combative and its expressions are essentially political. The advantage of the category of dissenting groups, as shown in this research, is the ability to represent both groups of Baul and Matua. Baul music is deceptively simple and rustic which

hides a message of religious dissent for the initiated. The message contained in their songs teach the Baul to subscribe to a way of life involving rituals and practices which are considered seriously taboo by both major religions. By doing away with the restriction involving dining and marriages imposed by caste in a silent manner, the Bauls also show their disregard for such arbitrary systems of social stratification. Thus, Bauls can identify with the first type of dissent which involves am indirect way of countering impositions of ritualistic and cultural boundaries. The Matuas, on the other hand, represent the more direct form of dissent which openly challenges existing social and political orders.

This research then takes up subaltern as a category and attempts to find out whether it merits application in the case of the Matuas or Bauls. Since the category of subaltern is essentially associated with people and groups in post-colonial societies who have been ignored by the colonial or nationalist historiography and who have not been able to claim their dues in the post -colonial political or social order. This inability may stem from their small number, the remoteness of their location. However, the most common cause of such exclusion is a deliberates attempt on the part of the native elite to not recognise their social or political contributions and to deny them a conceptual place where they can regularise their knowledge systems and speak to the power. The Matuas can identify with this interpretation of the subaltern identity as far as their history of rejection by upper castes is concerned. Matuas, despite being the largest group of lower castes in Bengal, never received any political or social recognition. Even when their sheer numbers and internal unity necessitated their partition in the nationalist movement, social and religious discriminations continued. The Bauls, around the same time period, were experiencing a kind of resurrection in the social consciousness of the educated Bengali bhadrolok community. The rediscovery of the beauty and humanistic philosophy of Baul songs made them ideal for being claimed as a symbol of Bengal's cultural heritage. In an age of nation-building, the Bauls emerged as a valuable identifier of the nation's cultural heritage. Therefore, it may be said that in Colonial Bengal, Bauls were neither overlooked nor were their expressions silenced. However, an element of rejections is felt in the conscious concealing of the Baul's secretive practices in genteel literature and discourse which might have proved too uncomfortable for them to digest.

At the end of the first chapter, the limitations of certain attempts to define the features of the caste system has been discussed, in connection to the Baul and Matua's caste identity which is an important feature of the present research. Thereafter, following James C Scott and Robert Redfield, an attempt has been made to ensure whether the two groups under scrutiny fulfil the criteria for being identified as Little Traditions as against the great Traditions of Vaishnavism and Islam. Here too, in contrast to the studies done by these scholars in other Asian countries like Vietnam, the Matua and Bauls do not present a complex set of rituals and practices, the acceptance of which by Great Traditions is not linear. For example, while upper caste Vaishnavas reject association with the Matuas, the lower strata of the Vaishnava society mix freely with them, even to the point of intermarriage. In case of the Bauls, while the Sahajiya tradition that is the core of the Bauls's religious belief, was rejected by orthodox Gaudiya Vaishnavism, the contemporary practising Vaishnavas are not averse to maintain a healthy relationship with Baul identity. Here once again, one can observe the angle of caste shadowing the Great-Little dichotomy of the two traditions as the instances of lower cast 'Jat Vaishnavas' being initiated as Vaishnavas and thereafter adopting a Baul lifestyle is quite common.

The question of defining traditions and the relations between them becomes more complex when one observes the relation between Muslim Bauls and Fakirs and their relations with orthodox Islam. Unlike their Hindu counterparts, Muslim Bauls defy their Great Tradition completely.

The second chapter focusses on the Bauls and the etymology of the very term, which is highly contested. This chapter has focussed on the Tantric and Buddhist traditions of Eastern India and particularly, of Bengal which acted as a precursor to many of the intricate practices that the later Baul faith would be associated with. Specially, the practices of Tantra and Bajrayana Buddhism which puts emphasis on the union of man and woman as a way to realise the state of divine pleasure.

This chapter puts particular emphasis on the emergence of Sahajiya Vaishnavism and attempts to trace the reasons responsible for the emergence of Sahajiya as a conscious ideology of dissent from the body Vaishnavism. The chapter deliberates upon the divisions that appeared within Chaitanya's Bhakti movement after the demise of that great preacher.

The division between the more erudite section of Vaishnavas based in Vrindavan and the proselytization oriented Bhakti-based approach of Adwaitya Acharya and Nityananda has been discussed in some detail. The reason being, this division, created immediately after the demise of Chaitanya, was the beginning of the solidification of Gaudiya Vaishnava orthodoxy. The caste identity of the follower of both groups revealed a clear tendency of the Bhakti-oriented section drawing more devotees from the lower castes, in keeping with Chaitanya's original vision. However, the later reconciliation between the two factions created a difficult situation for the lower caste Vaishnavas who were now again subjected to the same Brahminical oppression and exclusionary practises because of which they turned to Vaishnavism in the first place. The resultant dissent of a section of Vaishnavas laid the foundation of the Sahajiya way of Vaishnavism which eventually became the ideological cornerstone of the Bauls.

In this second chapter, particular importance has also been given to the spread of Sufism in Bengal and the mechanism and historical events through which Sufi preachers came to occupy a place of reverence among the common Muslims and Hindus alike. The spread of Sufis even to the remotest villages of Bengal and the relatively remote location of these villages, especially on the eastern part, has led to a mutual adaptation of beliefs and practices by the descendent s of Sufis as well as their contemporary followers. The Fakirs of Bengal today are the true descendants of the syncretic spirit of the early Sufis of Bengal the unnamed grave or Majar whom are still revered by but Hindus and Muslims. The chapter outlines the struggles Fakirs face from the orthodox Muslims as well as from a section of the descendants of these same Sufi saints who now adhere to a more orthodox interpretation of Islam.

The second chapter further delves into the crucial topic of the internal distinctions within the Bauls and how many of those distinctions are still relevant today. The traditional categories of Aul, Baul, Siddha or Sain, which denoted the different stages of Baul Sadhana (the progress of a Baul on the way to realise the innermost metaphysical truths about the nature of divine) are found, during research not to be particularly relevant anymore. However, the difference between the Hindu Baul and the Muslim Fakir persists. Their

differences in terms of rituals, beliefs and practices outweigh the similarities in their paths and the distinction is seen to be observed by the Bauls and Fakirs themselves.

The chapter ends with a part on the differences between the Bauls of the Rarh region, i.e., the region encompassing districts of Burdwan, Bankura, Birbhum etc. on the western side of the Ganges. Bagdi points to the districts of Nadia and Murshidabad, on the eastern side of the Ganges. The nature of Bauls in these two regions, despite their mutual connections are quite apparent. The Bauls of Rarh have been much more successful in embodying the Bengali bhadrolok's idealized depiction of the Baul as wandering minstrels. A section of theses Bauls have utilized the appreciation of the educated and wealthy Bengalis to raise Baul music and dance from the status of a rural artform to international recognition. The Bauls and Fakirs of Bagdi, on the other hand have been less successful in attracting such positive attention. In fact, it has been discussed in the chapter that before certain initiatives taken in the 90s, the Bauls of Bagdi were relatively unknown. This difference of status, and the resultant greater possibility of finding real practitioners or sadhaks of the Baul way was better in the Bagdi region which was a principal reason for choosing the two districts of this regions for research.

The third chapter which focuses on the origin and historical development of the Matuas as a sect attempts to determine whether the Matuas can be classified as a dissenting sect within the greater tradition of Vaishnavism and especially Gaudiya Vaishnavism. A study of the Matua sacred literatures that has been taken up here, reveals that the origin of the sect is indeed, steeped in the same revolutionary spirit that Chaitanya Deva himself showed when rebelling against the malpractices that engulfed Hinduism during his time. This attitude can be misinterpreted though, because the Matua sacred literatures insist on considering Harichnad Thakur, the charismatic and anti-caste founder of the sect, as an incarnation of Vishnu or Hari. However, these same texts also describe him as the only complete incarnation or 'avatara' or 'Purna Brahma avatara' who is greater than all incarnations of Vishnu who came before. Harililamrita, the principal religious text of the Matuas declare proudly, "ati nimne na namile kiser ishwar…..nich hoyia koribo nicher udhhar.."- which means that one's claim to divinity can not be universal if that person or avatara has not spread the gospel of God to the lowest of the low. This pride in their identity is what sets

the Matuas apart as a Scheduled Caste group in West Bengal. The chapter attempts to argue that the connection with Vaishnavism provides a solid ground of similarity between the two sects of the Baul and the Matua, a connection which may not be automatically apparent.

The chapter then takes up an aspect of the Matua religious identity which is seldom discussed and which connects them even more firmly with the other minor religious sects or 'Gouno Dhormo' of Bengal. This aspect is of 'Dehasadhana' or the concept that the human body is the most sacred of God's creation and therefore, it contains all the secrets for experiencing divinity that a traditional place of worship and the traditional systems of worship governing such places can't provide. The practice of Dehasadhana or body worship is very much a hidden practice which most common Matuas are not aware of and most Matua teachers or gurus are not willing to speak about. However, the existence of such practices has been acknowledged by Matua scholars as well as members of the influential Thakur family who are the undisputed spiritual and political leaders of the sect. Not only are the practices similar to that of the Bauls, but the songs hinting at such practices in a cryptic manner are in fact, treasured by the Bauls as well. In the opinion of this researcher, the existence of such practices and a common body of songs which express the highly deviant views of these sects in a form which is at once accessible, entertaining as well as unintelligible to al but the initiated sadhak, proves that both Baul and Matua are expressions of dissent from lower caste groups of Bengal and this dissent was expressed in the form of inward and outward expressions of their 'Gouno Dhormo' or minor religion.

After establishing the spiritual and philosophical background of the sect, this third chapter goes on to depict the awakening of the Matua consciousness and the distinct political and social character it took in the wake of epoch-making events of Indian history such as the division of Bengal in 1905 and the Swadeshi movement. The chapter depicts the keen understanding of Matua leaders like Guruchand Thakur in understanding the caste and class character of the nationalistic movement. The rejection of the nationalistic movement and the later embrace of the independent Scheduled Caste's movement in Bengal was spearheaded by the Matuas or Namashudras, which was the name adopted by Guruchand Thakur to refer to this group which was traditionally ridiculed by caste Hindus as Chandalas. The chapter ends with references to the scheduled caste movements in Bengal

before and after partition and focuses on the role of Jogendranath Mandal and the various political parties and other actors which ultimately resulted in the departure of Matua Namashudras as a significant political force in post-independence West Bengal.

The final chapter attempts to assess the present situation of the Baul and Matua sects as 21st century dissenting sects belonging to minor traditions. Through extensive field study involving personal interviews, group interviews, questionnaires and surveys; two sets of data and observations were prepared for the Bauls and the Matuas. During data collection, focus was on obtaining crucial information regarding certain socio-economic indicators such as ownership of land, pucca house, smartphone etc. Such data was always obtained being sensitive to the possibility of uneven distribution of opportunities among different genders and obtained data reflected such differences. Through the interviews taken with both the educated and 'elite' members of both sects as well as with the common members, an attempt was made to understand the contemporary relevance of the spirit of defiance and dissent that once marked these sects. It was the observation of the researcher that the two cases present very different scenarios in terms of their ability to maintain their distinctiveness and oppositional character. The Hindu Bauls have, by and large, lost the necessity or the will to dissent against the major religion or the caste system since they have become 'ennobled' or accepted within the higher echelons of Bengali society as cherished symbols of Bengali culture. The Muslim fakirs, on the other hand, are still maintaining their separate identity and their form of dissent through music and lifestyle which goes against Orthodox Islam. Matuas, on the other hand, have shed their reclusive mode op political and social operation. They are using their numbers in the villages of Nadia and Murshidabad to wrest political advantages and representation from major political parties. Despite these differences in approach to navigate the contemporary power structures, the centrality of spiritual beliefs has been largely lost for both Bauls and Matuas. For both groups, instead of such esoteric matters, more mundane and material considerations take precedence. In fact, within Matuas, the position of Matua religious beliefs and the authority of the leading Thakur family has diminished due to the overt nature of political participation undertaken by that family and its followers.

Interviews and reading of secondary sources have revealed the existence of a small but influential section of Matuas who are attempting to revive the caste-driven political mobilisation of the Matua Namashudras that was their forte in the period before independence. Inspired by Ambedkar's vision and a will to cultivate a Dalit identity for the Matuas, who are, in their opinion, still far too attached to the vestiges of Brahminical religion, this group of Matuas, comprising chiefly of the successful, educated working professionals are attempting for a retelling of the Matua identity. They insist, based on evidences they found in the sacred Matua hagiographies as well as in other, older sources, of a Buddhist heritage of the Matuas. However, as field data has revealed, the large majority of Matuas still soundly reject these ideas and they are still receptive to what is construed as Brahminical practices although the tendency to dissociate from such practices is increasing along with the social and economic progress of the Matuas.

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20.02.2023

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ANNEXURE ONE:

FIELD SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Maximum two respondents from the same family. Husband and Wife both can't be interviewed from same family. Brothers, Sisters, Parents can be interviewed.

Name: (Optional)

……

…….

Age: ……...

Gender: Male/Female/Other

Caste: Gen/SC/OBC/Other (If SC, whether identify as Namashudra or not. Yes/No) * Please tick the appropriate one.

Educational Qualification: Illiterate/ Below 8th Standard/Passed 8th but below Madhyamik/Madhyamik/HS/Graduate/Post Graduate/Professional Training Degrees (ITI etc.)

Profession: Farmer/ Small Business Owner/ Large Business Owner/ Private Service/ Govt. Service/ Teacher at Primary or Secondary School/ Homemaker/Other (Please Specify) ……

Approximate yearly household income:

(optional)……

Own land property: Yes/ No

Own pucca house or live in one owned by family member: Yes / No (Please tick yes if house has brick walls and cemented floor but tin roof)

Own motorcycle/scooter: Yes/ No

Own smartphone: Yes/ No

Active supporter of a Political Party: Yes/ No/ I only vote for that party/ Will not Disclose * Please tick the appropriate one.

Whether has knowledge of Ambedkar or his movement: Good grasp of his ideas/ some knowledge of his movement/ Only heard of him but not conversant with his ideas

Views regarding reservation for the Scheduled Caste in jobs and education: Strictly Necessary for all SC/ Necessary at Present for All SC but can be repealed after a given period if upliftment is visible/ Presently Necessary only for the weaker section of SC and not for creamy layer/ Will not disclose.

Whether has a history of being discriminated on the basis of caste: Yes/ No

If yes, please tick the appropriate one: Discrimination regarding use of common resources and services (tube well, pond, barber etc.)/Discrimination during entering a temple or Puja Mandap/ Discrimination at workplace (difficulty in finding recognition and getting promotion, taunts regarding appearance, caste identity etc.)/Discrimination during availing a government service/ Social Discrimination

(during marriage, from in-laws, from an upper caste neighbour during some festivities in his/her house etc.) (tick as many as applicable).

Whether read newspapers: Yes/No

Whether active on social media (Facebook/WhatsApp Groups/ YouTube Channels): Yes/No

Matua follower: Yes / No

Following questions are only for those who will tick 'yes' in the previous question

Whether wear Matua paraphernalia (Achar Mala etc.): Yes / No

Whether participate in Matam: Yes / No

Whether have a Hari Mandir at home: Yes/ No

Do you attend meetings/talks organized by Matua organizations: Yes / No

If yes, frequency of attending meetings/talks: Very frequent/ A few times in a year/ Rarely/ Not applicable

Do you observe Hindu Pujas/ Festivals at home (Saraswati, Laxmi Puja etc.): Yes/No

Whether Brahmin priest is appointed for Pujas etc.: Yes/No

Whether married inside/outside Matua community: Yes/No

If outside, whether married in a Vaishnava family: Yes/No/ Not Married

Whether married according to Vedic Rituals or Matua way: Vedic/Matua/ Not Married

Whether Shradhh done of family member in Matua way/ Vedic way: Vedic/Matua/ Not Applicable

Whether follower of a Matua guru: Yes/ No/ Don't believe in Guruvada

Do you think Harichand Thakur was an avatara or incarnation of Chaitanya: Yes/ No/ Can't Say

Whether visited Thakurnagar during Baruni: Yes/No

Whether visited Orakandi: Yes/No

Do you Venerate Budhha: Yes/ No/ I consider him an avatara of Vishnu or Krishna/No opinion.

Do you consider Harichand Thakur as an avatara of Budhha: Yes/ No/ Both are avataras/ Can't Say

Do you feel Vaishnavism and Matua way have much in common: Not at all/ Some things in common/ Many things in common/ Both are simply two different ways to worship the same gods

Do you feel Matuas should identify primarily as Hindus: Yes/No/Can't Say

Do you believe Matuas living in the border villages can face a threat from Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh: Yes/ No/ In some areas but not everywhere/ Can’t Say.